

the Beautiful World



時雨沢 恵一
Illustration: 黒星紅白

電撃文庫

Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. IV

by Keiichi Sigsawa

[Novel Updates](#)

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キノの旅IV

the Beautiful World

歌声が聞こえる。そこは、紅い世界だった。一面に紅い花が咲き乱れ、隙間なく大地を埋め尽くしている。

何もない、ただ蒼いだけの空が広がる。

……紅い草原に、再び歌声が聞こえた。

そしてそれが終わった時、最初に聞こえた声が訊ねる。

「これからどうするの？」

別の声は、

「いつかと同じさ。どこかへ行こう」

すかさず答えた。

「そうだね。そうしよう」

最初の声が、嬉しそうに同意した。

そして言う。

「そろそろホントに起こしてほしいなあ。

キノ」

人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、大人気新感覚ノベル第4弾!!





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(星空の「アート」をする筆者)

し ぐ さわけいいち
時雨沢恵一

1972年製造。今住んでいるアパートももうすぐ二年。
悪くはないが広くもない。より本を貯め込める場所を
目指して引っ越しを計画中。そう言えばここ10年、3
年以上一つの部屋に住んだことがないことに気がついた。
今度住む部屋は、×××××が×××××できれば
いいなあと本気で思います、はい。

【電撃文庫作品】

- キノの旅 the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅳ the Beautiful World

くろばしこうはく
イラスト：黒星紅白

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフ
ト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。
フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅IV

— the Beautiful World —

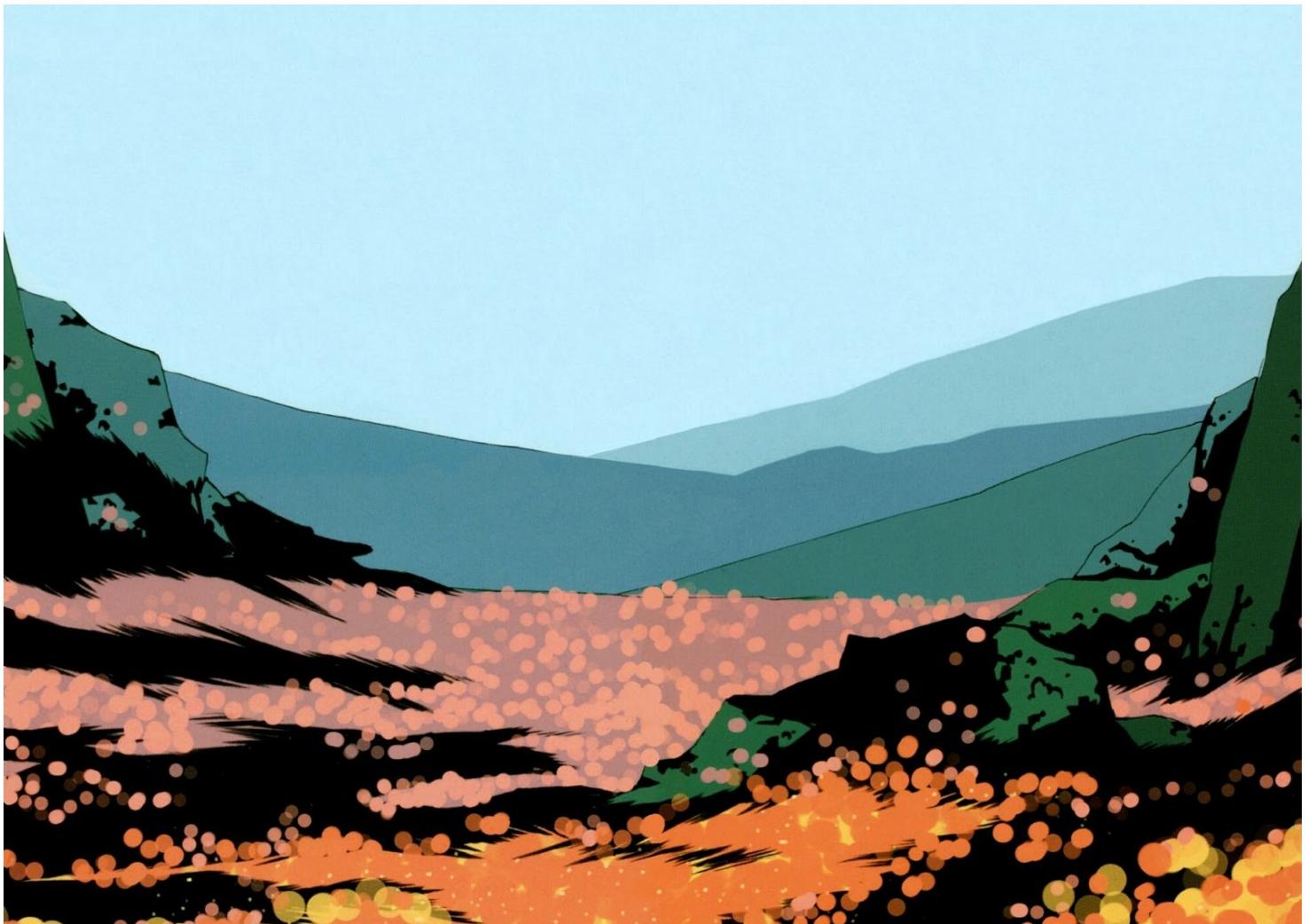


時雨沢 恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト: 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOHAKU KUROBOSHI



Prologue: "Amidst a Sea of Red" • B -Blooming Prairie • B-

A song was echoing.

The world was red.

Red flowers in spectacular bloom filled every patch of earth as far as the eye could see.

Overhead, the brilliant sky stretched on without a cloud to be seen.

The field seemed to be deserted.

Yet the song flowed across the world of red and blue.

It was slow at times, fast at others, but always soft.

With notes of both cheer and grief, it continued.

The song ended on a beautiful high note.

“Encore!”

From somewhere on the field came a voice.

“Give me two or three more. If not...”

The voice trailed off. The voice that had been singing finally spoke.

“If not?”

“Then stand me up.”

The first voice replied.

“Hah hah hah! All right. Then here’s one more—”

A song filled the red fields once again.

And when the song ended, the first voice spoke again.

“What’re you going to do now?”

The other voice replied,

“The same as usual. Let’s go somewhere.”

“Yeah. Let’s.”

The first voice cheerfully agreed.

Then it said,

“Could you stand me back up now, Kino?”



Chapter 1: "The Country With a Sculpture" -Angel?-

One day, a traveler came to a small country nestled in a valley.

Riding a motorrad, the traveler looked around with excitement at the plentiful rice paddies and the narrow streets steeped in history. Then stopped at the wooden sculpture standing in the plaza.

The sculpture was in the shape of a person holding a long stick. At his feet was a sculpture of an unrecognizable creature.

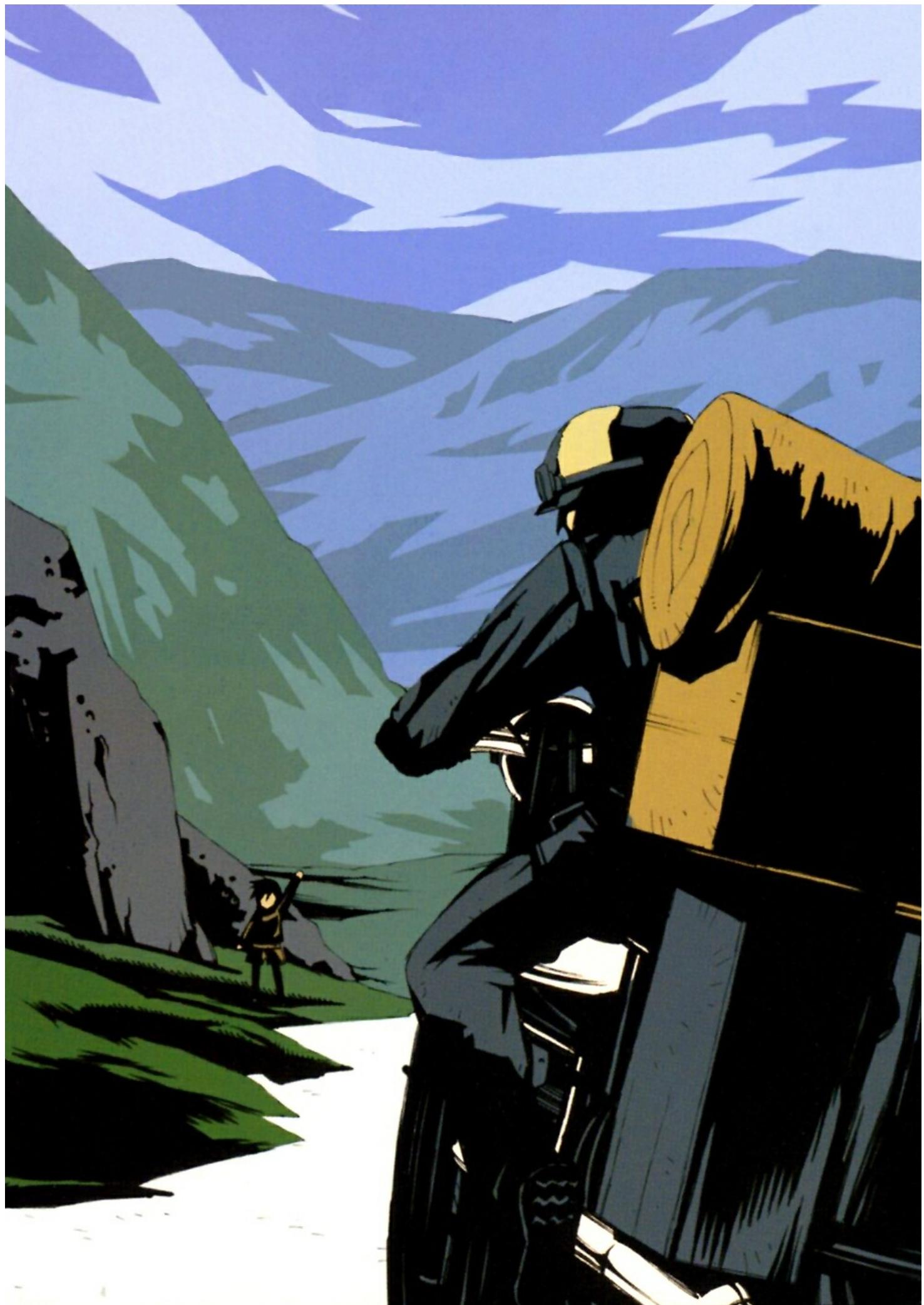
The young traveler asked a townsperson, “What is this a sculpture of?”

The townsperson replied with a smile, “This is an angel who once descended from the heavens to save our country. With his staff, he annihilated the 22 demons that plagued our land in the blink of an eye, and brought peace to our home. Then he returned to the heavens.”

“An angel from the heavens? I don’t get it,” said the motorrad.

With eyes narrowed in nostalgic reminiscence, the townsperson replied, “This is a legend passed down in our village...”

*



Chapter 2:" -----" -Solo-

The plains were beautiful.

The wind gently shook the grass and flowers blanketing the earth.

Through the plains ran a straight road.

The road was white and seemed to go on forever. Where in the world did it lead?

A motorrad was racing down the road.

It was laden with many things.

The rider spotted something ahead on the road and slowed.

A child was waving by the roadside.

The motorrad stopped.



"Please take me with you," said the child.

But the motorrad immediately replied, "No. I don't have room for you."

The traveler on the motorrad asked, "Where did you come from?"

The child did not answer.

"What's your name?"

"—," the child replied. Then, "Please take me with you."

"No. I don't have room for you," the motorrad immediately replied.

The traveler seemed to give a troubled moan.

"I can't take responsibility for someone else. Keeping myself alive is hard enough. So I can't take you with me. Please don't ask me to bring you along. I know... I know this is very selfish of me."



"I can't carry two riders anyway," the motorrad said quietly.

The traveler approached the child and crouched, looking into the child's eyes.

"Goodbye, ——."

The traveler straddled the motorrad and rode away.

The plains were beautiful.

The plains were beautiful.

The wind gently shook the grass and flowers blanketing the earth.

Through the plains ran a straight road.

The road was white and seemed to go on forever. Where in the world did it lead?

A child remained there.

The child would remain there, on and on and on.

*

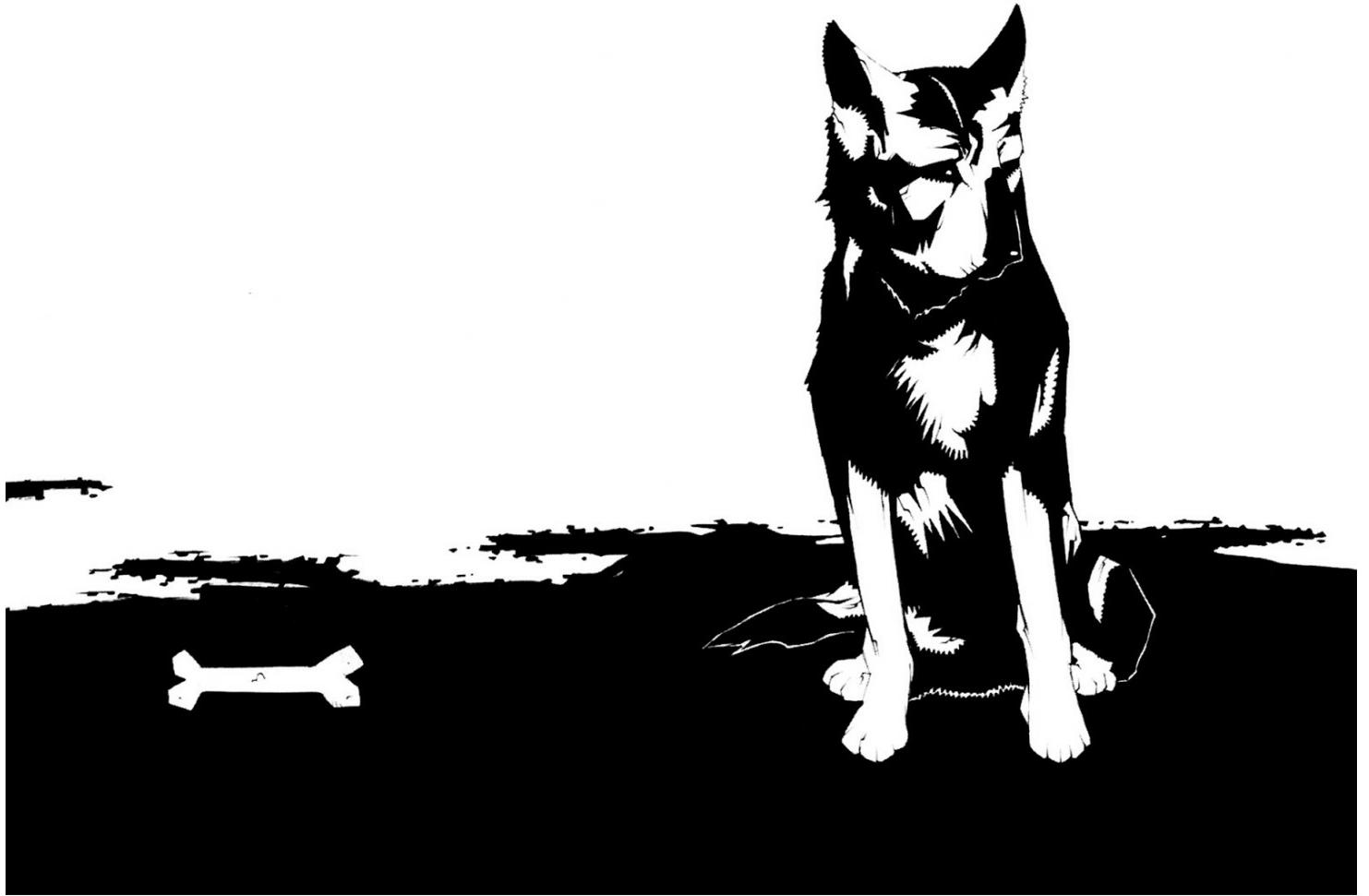
Though I did not know the place,

I set out for the land of my dreams

Having arrived at the land of my dreams,

I found I did not know the place

-Wherever I go, there I am.-



Chapter 3: "The Country of Couples" -Even a Dog Doesn't Eat-

"Hello, Traveler! Welcome to our country," the soldier exclaimed. "Here's a questionnaire you must fill out if you wish to enter. And please, no need to overthink things. Just pick the answers you are immediately drawn to. Follow your heart."

Without warning, the soldier in the tiny guardhouse before the towering gates handed the traveler a thick bundle of papers. And a pen as well.

The traveler looked down at the papers in her hands, taken aback.

The traveler was in her mid-teens with messy, short black hair. She had large eyes and fair features, and had a pair of goggles hanging from her neck.

She wore a black jacket with a thick belt, from which hung several pouches. Strapped around her right thigh was a hand persuader holster. Inside was a revolver with an octagonal barrel.

"Just me?" asked the traveler. "I want to bring my partner along too," she said, pointing her thumb at the motorrad propped up behind her. The motorrad was fully laden with bags, a sleeping bag, and travel gear.

"Just you, Traveler. Your name, please?"

"Kino," Kino replied, and pointed at the motorrad again. "And that's Hermes."

"Hi," Hermes the motorrad piped up from a distance. The soldier gave him a nod.

"Let me greet you once again," the soldier said. "Welcome to our country. I just need Kino to fill out the questionnaire. It might take a bit of time, but do try to answer all the questions to the best of your abilities. Here, you can use the table and chair."

"Right. ...And I need to fill this out if I want to enter?" Kino asked.

The soldier replied, "That's correct," and nodded firmly.

Kino took a seat and began to flip through the pages.

The questionnaire asked her all sorts of things, from her name and age, gender and height, weight, hobbies, favorite foods, favorite colors, favorite and least favorite songs, what she thought of herself, the way she thought, to her sense in fashion.

It also asked what shape she saw in what seemed to be a blotch of spilled ink, what animal she would compare herself to, what she thought of boxing or farming, if she liked children, if she was an early riser, if she liked pets, if she had ever cried at a play or a book, whether she preferred cats or dogs, if she had ever dreamed in color, if she was self-conscious, if she disliked living with the elderly, if she enjoyed gambling, and more.

"Phew..."

Kino sighed again and again as she went through the entire questionnaire. Then she handed the completed bundle back to the soldier, who waited with a smile.

The soldier took photos of Kino, saying it was part of entry procedures. One frontal bust shot and one full-body shot. The soldier asked her to smile, but in the photos Kino looked nothing short of indifferent.

"That's all. Thank you very much."

Finally, they had permission to enter. The thick, heavy gates opened. Kino smacked Hermes out of his slumber.

By the time they stepped into the gates, the sun was beginning to set. Dark clouds were gathering in the sky.

Kino found a cheap hotel and found herself a place to stay.

Soon it began to rain.

Deciding to stay in for the day, Kino had dinner, showered, and went straight to bed.

The next day, Kino rose at dawn.

The rain had stopped. Kino did light exercises in her room. Then she did persuader drills with Cannon.

She had breakfast at the hotel and smacked Hermes awake, before leaving

her luggage in the room and going out to sightsee.

The country was not very large.

It consisted of flat lands surrounded by walls. The city was meticulously planned and filled with austere concrete buildings without a shred of history.

"It's not that pretty here," Hermes remarked.

Kino asked a passerby about local attractions. Everyone gave about the same answer.

"Attractions for travelers? Hm...maybe the fact that we have great public security?"

"That's a tough question. If I had to say...it's a tough question."

"We have some great drinks. Oh, you don't drink? Then I don't think I can suggest anything..."

"Nope. This country wasn't founded that long ago, so we're not exactly a tourist destination."

Kino rode Hermes through the country with no destination in mind. Eventually she reached the wall and turned back around.

They stopped at an open-air cafe so Kino could take her time with a cup of tea.

After the break, Kino went back to Hermes, whom she had parked by the sidewalk. That was when they heard raised voices.

Kino and Hermes spotted a young couple on a slope leading to the road, arguing loudly. The argument soon escalated into an all-out brawl.

"What's going on?" Kino wondered, shocked. Hermes sounded amused. "It's obviously a street fight, Kino. From the looks of the hook combo, I'd say the man's probably going to win. But the woman's kicks aren't too bad either. Oh, hey! That's a critical hit with the left high kick!"

"I wasn't asking for a play-by-play..."

"Are you gonna stop them, Kino?"

"I just want them to get out of the way. Maybe I should just talk to them,"

Kino said, stepping forward.

"Traveler! What are you doing?"

A young police officer in uniform called from behind, stopping her.

"The police. Perfect timing," said Hermes.

"It looks like they're having a fight," Kino said. "Could you stop them?"

The officer shook his head. "Just leave them be, Traveler."

"Is that really all right?"

"It certainly is. And I think the fight's just about over."

The officer was right. Kino turned to find the couple walking away together, side-by-side.

"There's something you need to know, Traveler," said the officer. "If you spot a couple arguing or fighting, you mustn't try to stop them. No one in this country intervenes in fights between couples—married or not. It always ends before it gets too serious."

"Really?" Kino asked, surprised. The officer smiled.

"Yes. And even if you were to step in, it wouldn't do you any good. Please take your time enjoying everything our country has to offer. We have so many things you won't find anywhere else. If you'll excuse me, then."

The officer saluted and left.

"Things like what?" Hermes asked.

Kino had a brief lunch and refueled Hermes. After some deliberation, they decided to finish sightseeing for the day and take time to relax. Kino rode Hermes back to the hotel.

They were waiting at the stoplight when the man in the car next to them suddenly called out.

"Hello there, Traveler!"

He was in his thirties, wearing glasses and a suit with a tie.

"Do you have some time, Traveler? If you do, why not come by my house for

some tea? It's not far—I'm on my way back right now. What do you say? My wife and I would love to hear about your travels and what you think about our country."

Hermes was all for the idea of visiting, as they had nothing else to do. Kino nodded to the man and said they would follow his car.

The man lived in one of many two-story townhouses lined up together. His wife, a beautiful woman with long hair, came to the door to greet him.

"This here is my wife. Isn't she gorgeous?" the man said, giving the woman a kiss on the cheek.

"It's wonderful to meet you two. Welcome to our country," she said, smiling. Kino greeted her back and introduced Hermes and herself.

The man ushered Kino inside. The woman went around behind her to close the door, when she spotted Cannon holstered on Kino's thigh. Her eyes widened as she said quietly, "Traveler, you have a persuader with you."

"Hm? Oh, does it bother you? I'll put it away immediately," Kino said apologetically. But the woman smiled and shook her head.

"Not at all. Traveling is dangerous, after all. How long will you be staying in our country?"

"Until tomorrow," Kino answered. "I'll most likely be leaving in the morning."

"I see," the woman muttered.

The man showed Kino to the dining table and offered her a seat. Kino propped up Hermes on his center stand behind them.

"Could you bring us something to drink, Honey?" the man said to the woman, who was in the kitchen next to the dining room.

"Of course. Give me one minute," the woman chirped.

The man turned to Kino. "It's a pleasure to have you over, Traveler. We almost never get the chance to meet outlanders here. What do you think about our country?"

"It's boring," Hermes said immediately.

The man chuckled. "You're very honest, I see. And you're right. We're a boring country. No spectacular scenery or history to speak of. But it's a good place. It's peaceful and safe here, and relaxing to boot. I have time for tennis with my friends every weekend."

The woman brought in glasses and a bottle of liquor on a tray. She poured a glass for her husband and handed it to him.

The man looked a little surprised, but he downed the glass in one go and exhaled. His face slowly turned red. "Honey, where are the sides?"

"Oh, right. Give me a second," the woman replied, turning.

"IT'S ALREADY BEEN A SECOND! I WANT MY SIDES NOW, YOU STUPID LITTLE BITCH!"

The man rose from his seat, grabbed the woman by the hair, and dragged her away.

The woman gave a soft scream as they disappeared into the next room.

Kino heard several impacts.

"Stupid pig! Humiliating me every step of the way!"

The man was shouting and swearing.

"You're useless! How many times do I have to tell you to stop making me lose face?! Lazing around at home like an ungrateful bitch! Who do you think keeps you fed?! Sandy, are you *listening* to me?!"

There was a moment of silence. Followed by—

"Forget this. I'm in a good mood today, so I'll let you off easy. Get back in the kitchen and fix us something. Don't just stand there, get moving!"

Kino heard something fall.

The man returned to the dining room, flushed red. An apologetic look rose to his face the second he took a seat.

"I'm terribly sorry about that awful display, Traveler. She's usually a bit better about homemaking. Please—Sandy's always been useless, so be patient with her. Would you like a glass?"

"No thank you," Kino replied, expression unchanging. "I'm afraid I don't drink."

"Ah, then try some of this," the man said, offering Kino a small plate of biscuits.

Kino thanked the man and put a biscuit into her mouth. That was when the woman happened to stagger into the dining room. Her hair was disheveled and she was pressing a hand against her forehead. She hobbled into the kitchen like a ghost.

"Tea for the traveler! Now!" the man commanded. He poured himself another glass of liquor, and became more and more talkative. "Ha ha! You have no idea how envious I am of you, Traveler. Going from one place to another, seeing new places... I used to ride a motorrad myself, you know. One of those models with two engines sticking out like this. Not to brag, but I was pretty good. Ended up flipping it over, though, so I had to return the one I rented, though... Hic! I wanted to be a traveler, you know. Traveler, do you enjoy it? Going around the world?"

Kino smiled. "Very much. It's fun to see how different countries have their own unique customs."

"You're pretty good, Kino," Hermes muttered to himself.

"Yes, exactly!" the man agreed, slapping his knee. He began to sway. "There are different countries! And you go to them. Couldn't ask for a better life, no sir! That's why you have to get out there and travel while you're still young! Hic!"

The man tried to lean forward, but lost his balance and wobbled. He swung his arms to reorient himself and ended up hitting his wife, who was walking in with a plate. She dropped the plate. Food scattered all over the floor.

"Ah!" the woman screamed.

The man's face went cold. He shot his wife a glare.

"Don't 'ah' me, you useless pig! Look what you did to the food! Hic! Useless! Idiot! Lick this stuff off the floor!"

Kino ate another biscuit.

The man grabbed the woman by her long hair again and dragged her into the next room.

"Retarded! Moron!"

Kino heard several more impacts. Followed by more swearing.

"Can't even serve food right! You're a waste of space! Imagine how I feel, having to put up with a bitch like you every day! What, cat got your tongue? Don't just stand there, Sandy. Are you ignoring me?!"

Silence.

"Why do you have to be so slow, goddammit? The first guest in forever, and you have to mess it all up. Who do you think supports this family? Well?! ... Look, I'm tired from work and going to bed. So clean up your damned mess and polish the floor until it's sparkling."

Then the sound of something falling again.

The man returned to the dining room.

"Terribly sorry, but I'm going to excuse myself now, Traveler. It was great to get to talk to you. Please make yourself at home a little longer if you're not busy —just tell my wife what to do, and she'll probably do what you order. Even if she is a useless little bitch," he said in an exceedingly polite tone, and dragged out his wife. "Now get to work!"

Her forehead, which he had hit earlier, was swollen. The corner of her lip was torn and bleeding. The man shoved the woman to the floor and wobbled away. Soon came the sound of footsteps staggering up the stairs.

Kino cast Hermes a glance and stood. She tried to help the woman pick up the food off the floor.

"Please, there's no need," the woman said. "I'm sorry. But it's really all right. Please sit down and relax."

"Yeah. You don't have to help, Kino," Hermes agreed. Kino looked at him again before taking a seat.

The woman pressed a hand to her bleeding lip as she picked up the food and cleaned the floor.

Once she had cleared the table, the woman washed her hands in the kitchen and wiped her face. Then she brewed Kino tea. Kino took the cup with a word of thanks.

“One moment, please,” the woman said, and left the dining room. Her footsteps disappeared up the stairs, then came down again.

The woman returned to the dining room and sat down across from Kino. Her right eyelid was swollen and blood had dried on her lower lip.

“I’m so sorry about the commotion. It must have given you a fright.” she said.

“A little,” Kino replied. “But Hermes and I saw a couple fighting in broad daylight on the street earlier, so it wasn’t too much of a surprise. I tried to stop the couple, but the police told me not to.”

“I see...”

“Is that how things work here?” Hermes asked.

The woman nodded. “Yes. In our country, anything is permitted between people in love. So when it comes to your spouse, nothing short of murder is considered a crime.”

Kino and Hermes listened quietly.

“But this isn’t anything out of the ordinary for me. My husband’s been this way for years.”

“I see,” Kino said.

“Hey, why’d you marry someone like him?” Hermes asked bluntly.

The woman smiled. Almost as if she had been hoping for—and dreading—the question.

“Why did I marry him, I wonder?”

“Was he like that before you got married?” Hermes asked.

“No, he wasn’t. He seemed like a kind, diligent man when I first met him on a blind date.”

"What's a 'blind date'?" Kino asked.

"Maybe it's the name of the restaurant they met at?" Hermes suggested. The woman shook her head.

"It's a custom we have here in this country. Men and women seeking marriage are introduced to one another by a third party. They put together people from compatible family situations and economic backgrounds to help them get married."

"Does that mean some people end up marrying people they don't even love?" Kino asked, shocked.

"I suppose you could say that. In our country, you're not considered a real adult until you're married. Men have to provide for their families and women have to take care of the home."

"Hm."

"That's why people start getting anxious as they enter their late twenties. They worry that they'll never be able to get married, that they'll never be treated like a real member of society. People like that usually sign up for blind dates."

"I see. But isn't marriage usually for people in love who want to be together for the rest of their lives?" Kino wondered.

"That's right."

"But these blind dates are backwards. You're choosing a person to be with because you want to be married."

The woman thought for a moment, and nodded. "That does seem to be the case, when you put it that way. But it's the same either way. Some people marry for love but end up fighting constantly, and some people meet through a blind date and end up happy together. Like my parents. I grew up watching them, so I always dreamed of being in a marriage like theirs. My parents were my role models. I'm sure it must have been the same for you, Traveler."

Kino did not say anything. Hermes spoke instead. "But you ended up with a guy like him for a husband."

"That's right. People always tend to be more careful before and right after marriage. So I had no idea what he was really like. But over time, we slowly stopped being so careful around one another... And now it's come to this. Or maybe he wasn't always this way, and he changed over the years. One day he saw a bit of dust on the floor and hit me out of nowhere. I was so surprised then that I could barely think. I just kept letting him hit me."

"I see," Hermes said.

"After that, he started hitting me for the most trivial things. It got worse when he was drunk. He'd push me down the stairs, burn me with his cigarettes... Once, he left me in the snow without even a jacket."

Kino was silent. But Hermes urged her to continue, amused. "What else?"

The woman said indifferently, "When my injuries were so bad that he couldn't hit me without getting his hands dirty, he'd torment me in other ways. He'd tell my close friends that I was mentally ill or insane, and even when he didn't beat me, he'd yell at me once an hour. None of the things I brought with me when we got married are still around. He broke them or threw them out. Until last year, I had a pet cat. But he threw her against the floor when I was out, and I had to put her down. He was fined for animal abuse. He beat me afterwards, saying it was my fault for having a pet in the first place."

Kino was silent. Hermes said, "Hm. I see."

"I wanted to study, but he burned all the books I bought. He says there's no merit in a housewife getting an education. So I bought books on cooking and housekeeping instead, but he threw them out, saying that I was too hopeless for anything and my books were a waste of money. Now I have no idea how the household finances are. I don't have a life insurance policy anymore, and no spending money of my own. He says that a slave doesn't need money. That I should shut up and do as I'm told."

"Ah, I see. I get it," Hermes said. The woman continued.

"But you know, the morning after the first time he hit me, he got down on his knees and apologized in tears. So I broke down crying too and forgave him, thinking, 'What a kind person he is'. I thought that maybe, I messed up so much as a wife that I drove him to that point. I used to think that if he was a flawed

person, I was the only one who could fix him. That that was my duty.”

The woman gave a self-deprecating laugh.

“Have you ever considered divorce?” Kino asked. The woman looked even sadder than when she was being beaten.

“I suppose it’s only natural that you don’t know, Traveler. Divorce is forbidden in our country. It’s considered a crime. Marriage only ends when you are parted by death.”

“Wow. Is this because of religious beliefs?”

“No. You could call it a social norm. Divorce was allowed in the past, but even then it was considered a great dishonor. Divorced people were labeled social outcasts who couldn’t maintain families. Divorce was outlawed so people wouldn’t be excluded from society that way.”

“I see...” Kino whispered. And she glanced at Hermes to say—

“Traveler,” the bruised woman interrupted, voice lowered. “I have a request.”

Kino turned. “Is it something I can do?”

“It’s something only you can do. And it won’t be hard for you. I can even pay you, Traveler. Take anything in this house you think you might need. It’s about my husband.”

“I knew it,” Hermes said.

“What would you have me do?” asked Kino.

The woman turned to make sure no one was behind her. Then she said in a low, grave voice, “Traveler, please shoot my husband to death.”

“Sure thing!” Hermes exclaimed immediately.

“Please ignore Hermes,” Kino said.

The woman’s expression didn’t change. She kept her gaze on Kino. “Please. He must be asleep right now. I even have the bedroom key here.”

Kino shook her head. “I can’t. I’m afraid I’ll have to turn down your request.”

“Aww, so you’re not gonna do it?” asked Hermes.

"No. This is murder," Kino replied.

Hermes sounded dubious. "And you've never killed anyone before, Kino?"

"This is different. I'd be directly going against the laws of this country, is what I'm trying to say. I don't want to go to prison."

"I guess whatever happens to the lady here, you'll be free anyway. So it doesn't really matter if you think about it that way," Hermes said. It was difficult to tell how serious he was being.

"Er..." the woman began. "That won't be a problem. You won't be charged with murder."

Kino was bewildered. Almost as though she had woken up at noon. "What do you mean?"

"In our country, outlanders aren't charged with crimes as long as they leave within one day. In the past, the police did go after travelers who committed crimes, but they never managed to catch the ones who left the walls. So they made a law saying that outlanders are exempt from prosecution if they left, so that the police would be spared public criticism. That's why you'll be able to leave freely tomorrow morning, no matter how many people you kill here."

Kino did not say a word. Hermes spoke instead. "Well, Kino?"

The woman continued. "The police officer must have stopped you from intervening in the fight because of this law. I'm sure I'll be charged with telling you about the exemption, but that doesn't matter."

Kino fell into thought. Then she said, "Could I ask you a few things?"

"Of course."

"If you were to kill your husband because you couldn't stand his violent behavior, how would you be punished?"

"With execution. The killing of a spouse is first-degree murder. Since marital violence isn't a crime, I would have murdered a man for no reason."

"One more question. Your husband called you 'Sandy'. Is that your name?"

The woman smiled. "It's a nickname. It comes from 'sandbag'."

Kino was silent.

"Are you listening, Kino?" asked Hermes.

"I am."

The woman gave Kino a desperate stare. "Please...I'm begging you..."

"Well, Kino?"

Kino rose and looked at Cannon, still holstered on her thigh. It was fully loaded.

"Hermes, we're going."

"I knew it," Hermes replied.

The woman was in disbelief. She leapt to her feet, letting her chair fall, and clung to Kino's leg. "No! Please! I can't go on living like this, Traveler! You saw how he hurt me! I'm begging you, you're my only hope! This is my first and only chance! I've been waiting and waiting for a day like this to come, so please..."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Kino said, coolly and slowly shaking off the woman's grip.

Then she raised Hermes's center stand and pushed him to the door.

"Please...you have to help me..."

When she reached the doorway, Kino turned to the woman weeping on the floor.

"Thank you for the tea and biscuits—"

And she finally said to the woman, who sat wide-eyed with tears streaming down her face,

"—But I don't want to be anyone's god."

Kino and Hermes left the townhouse.

"That left a bad taste in my mouth," Kino confessed.

"I understand," Hermes said reassuringly, "but only the people here can solve these problems. A traveler can argue all she likes, but the people in this country can just shut her down saying that an outlander's got no right to interfere."

Meddling in fantastic affairs, right?"

"You mean 'domestic affairs'?"

"Yeah, that."

Hermes said no more.

"You're right, Hermes. But that's why I'm even more frustrated."

"Cheer up. They say stuffing yourself with sweets helps you perk up. This is fact, by the way."

Kino exhaled. "All right. Maybe the cafe from this morning might have something..."

Starting Hermes, Kino put on her hat and goggles and rode down the street.

"By the way, Kino... You noticed too, right?" Hermes said hesitantly.

Kino nodded. "Yeah. Serving strong liquor so early in the day, and dropping the plate...it was all intentional. I noticed."

"She's a shrewd one. I'm impressed."

"People have their reasons."

"Hello, Traveler," said the police officer whom Kino and Hermes had met that morning.

The open-air cafe had closed for the day, and the area was deserted. Kino was just putting on her hat in disappointment.

Without a word, she went up to the officer. And as he stood in confusion, she passed by his right side.

At that very moment, Kino reached for the officer's holster and pulled out his hand persuader. The officer noticed too late. Before he could react, he felt something touch his back. Frozen, he heard a voice behind his ear.

"Don't move. You don't have to put up your hands."

"T-traveler? D-d-d-do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"Yes. And I also know that pulling the trigger won't mean anything to me, legally speaking. I'm leaving the country tomorrow, for your information."

The officer was lost for words. But soon, he managed to speak. “D-did someone tell you? Wh-who was it? If you’re going to kill me anyway, could you please tell me? A-a-and give me time to contact headquarters about this person?”

“This guy’s really devoted to his job, Kino,” said Hermes. “I can respect that. Let’s give him a double promotion.”

Kino continued indifferently. “I tortured the information out of someone. I was told that I would not be held responsible for any crime as long as I left by tomorrow.”

The officer was silent.

“I take it that it’s all right for me to pull the trigger, then?”

“Er...I... No! I have a wife waiting for me back home. I don’t want to die yet.”

“Really? Then here you are.”

Kino put the hand persuader back in the officer’s holster.

The officer turned in shock, and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that Kino was holding her finger to his back. Then he shook his head again and again, and exhaled.

“It’s a strange law,” Kino said.

Though the officer was glaring, he replied courteously, “It is. One we should be getting rid of, in my opinion.”

“I agree. I have no idea what I’ll end up doing because of it.”

“Speeding, stealing, kidnapping, or eating and running,” Hermes joked.

The officer sighed again.

“Please don’t worry. I plan to leave the country tomorrow. I won’t do anything here, and I swear to not tell anyone about this law. By the way, could I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“It’s about the law that allows spouses to do anything to each other. Does this country have any plans to change it?”

"Why would we?" the officer asked, flabbergasted.

"But Officer," said Hermes, "that means it's okay to hurt someone as long as they're married to you, whether it's punching or kicking."

"Yes."

"And this country believes it's okay?" Kino asked.

The officer finally seemed to understand Kino and Hermes' line of thought. He gave them a look like an adult educating a child. "That's not a concern. After all, it's between spouses."

Kino and Hermes were silent.

"Married couples fight in any country. It is impossible to stop, and the police cannot possibly intervene."

"Not even for abuse?" asked Kino.

The officer shook his head. "No. Even if you would label the continued winning streak of one spouse over the other as 'abuse', the police does not intervene. After all, this is something between the couple. Outsiders have no right to interfere in matters of matrimony. It would be meddling in domestic affairs."

"Meddling in domestic affairs, huh," Hermes repeated.

"People have the right and responsibility to choose their own way of life. A married couple is considered one body, one flesh. They must cooperate and work together until death do them part. In sickness and in health, they must pull through together. They must share everything together and live under the same roof as family. Which is why no outsider—much less the law—should interfere with a marriage. In fact, it's not something that can be interfered with."

Kino and Hermes were silent.

"I'm a married man myself. So I know all too well that at times, it's inevitable that you end up fighting with the person you are closest with. Sometimes you end up fighting because you love each other so much. But as I have said, this is a problem between the couple that must be solved *by* the couple. Sometimes,

fighting and making up later can strengthen the relationship further.”

“Really?” Kino asked dubiously. The officer chuckled.

“You’ll understand if you ever get married, Traveler. It’ll all click someday.”

“I see,” Hermes mumbled. Kino said nothing. Hermes asked, “What do you say, Kino? Feel like shooting?”

The officer flinched. “What?! What do you—”

Kino lightly tapped on Cannon, strapped to her thigh, and glanced at the officer. “No,” she said.

The officer’s relief was palpable. Kino shot him a glare.

As the officer trembled again, she asked, “I’m craving something sweet, officer. Do you have any good places to recommend?”

That night. Kino was asleep.

The man whose house Kino and Hermes had visited rose from his bed and went down to the dining room. He ordered the woman—who was asleep at the table—to bring him food immediately.

When she asked him what he wanted, he replied in a loving tone, “I’m fine with anything. Everything you make tastes like pig slop anyway.”

The woman chopped up a piece of steak and cooked it on a frying pan. She brought it to the dining room, pan and all.

The man sat before his plate. That was when the woman said quietly,

“Honey, I learned a valuable lesson today.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

With puffy red eyes, the woman smiled. “That there’s no god in this world. And that there are no miracles. That people have to solve their own problems. I...I had it all wrong. I just sat around without lifting a finger, blindly hoping things would turn out right. I assumed that my fairy godmother would show up one day and grant my wish. I’m sure my parents didn’t have it as easy as it looked. They must have put so much effort into getting along.”

“Still a brainless little sandbag. Shut your hole and give me my steak. And

something to drink, too. And stay right there—I'm gonna need a workout after dinner. Brainless pig."

The woman stood stock-still for a time. The frying pan sizzled in her hands.

"Move it. Or are you asking for another one?" the man spat without looking at the woman.

But she simply stood blankly, deep in thought.

"Hey!" the man growled, but the woman did not move.

Finally, the man angrily rose to his feet. His chair clattered to the floor.

A scream filled the dining room. It was high-pitched and went on for what seemed like forever, echoing across the neighborhood. But no one cared.

The next day. It was the third day of Kino's stay in the country.

By the time Hermes woke up, Kino was already done packing.

"Good morning, Kino. Leaving already?"

Kino replied, wiping her goggles, "Yeah. There's nothing really interesting here. And I might gain weight if I stay too long."

They made their way to the western gate. Hermes asked Kino if she would do something to help the woman, but Kino replied, "No. It's not like she's going to do anything."

"True. She's not you, Kino."

At the gates, Kino shut off Hermes' engine and climbed off. She pushed him through the gates and was almost out of the country, when someone called to her.

"Traveler!"

Kino turned. The woman from the previous day was waving and smiling at her from a car parked a slight distance away. She drove over to Kino and Hermes.

The woman disembarked and stood before them. Though there was a black bruise on her forehead, she seemed to be in good spirits. "I'm glad I caught you before you left. I wanted to see you off."

"Thank you. It's nice to see you again," Kino said uncomfortably.

The woman smiled and tapped her car. "Come on out, Honey. We agreed we'd see off the traveler together."

The man slowly disembarked.

Bandages were wrapped around his head. His left arm was in a cast slung from his neck, and his glasses were bent.

"What happened?" asked Kino. The man did not reply. The woman gave a shy smile. "We had a bit of a lovers' spat yesterday." She tapped him on the shoulder.

The man twitched. He stood there without a word.

"Honey, say hi to the traveler."

"Oh...er...right. Er...good morning..." the man said feebly. The woman reached into the back seat and took out a rolling pin.

She brought it down on her husband's back.

"AH!" the man screamed, flinching. Unperturbed, the woman struck him seven more times as he stood helplessly.

"Speak up. No one's going to hear you if you talk like that."

"I-I'm sorry," the man managed to say. The woman bent down and swung the rolling pin at the man's thigh. He crumpled and landed on his injured left arm, and screamed again.

Kino watched as indifferently as she had the previous day.

The woman ignored the fallen man and turned back to Kino. That was when another person stepped in.

"Ah! I see you're leaving, Traveler." The officer whom Kino had threatened the previous day came jogging. "It's good to see you again. Are you going now? Did you enjoy your stay?" he asked with a smile. Kino nodded. Hermes agreed.

"It was great. It's not every day you're tailed by the police from the break of dawn."

The officer's eyes went wide, but he quickly put on an embarrassed look.

"Heh...so you noticed. I'm terribly sorry. This is my job. I'm quite devoted to it, you know."

"That's pretty good," Hermes chuckled with the officer.

That was when the man suddenly leapt to his feet and cried, "H-help me!" He clung to the officer's leg. "Officer, you have to help me! Y-y-you have no idea what this woman put me through!"

The officer gave the man an annoyed look and turned to the woman.

"He's my husband," the woman said.

"You have to save me, Officer! She's going to kill me!"

"Now, now. Get a hold of yourself," the officer said, coolly and slowly shaking off the man's grip.

The woman leaned in close to the man and gave him a gentle smile. "Don't worry, Honey. I'm not going to kill you."

"Agh!" The man shrank back.

"I avoided all your vitals. I used to be a doctor before we got married, do you remember?"

"See, sir?" said the officer, "You're going to be just fine. Now calm down."

The man pointed at the bandages around his head. "Look at this! My wife hit me over the head with a hot frying pan last night! Then she hit me with a chair while I was reeling. My left arm's cracked, see? Look!" he cried, pointing at his cast.

The officer seemed nothing if not amused. "Now, now, sir. Injuries from fights with your wife are like medals of honor." An old man passing by with his wife chuckled quietly.

"This is ridiculous..." the man moaned. The woman's foot slammed into his side.

With a cry, the man clutched his side and fell to the ground. And he went quiet.

The woman bowed apologetically to the officer again and again. "I'm so sorry,

Officer. Please excuse him.”

“Not at all,” replied the officer, “It’s my job to keep the peace. It’s only natural to give counsel for even the smallest of potential problems. To be honest, it’s so peaceful around here that I barely have any work to do.”

The officer saluted and gave a slight wink.

“My,” the woman exclaimed, smiling.

“Please...you have to help me... Officer, please...she’s going to kill me...”

The officer crouched down and said indifferently to the man, “Look, sir. The police don’t have time for this. Now forget your paranoia and get along with your wife. You’re married; this is a problem you have to work out amongst yourselves.”

The officer then rose and saluted Kino and Hermes. “If you’ll excuse me, now. I apologize again for tailing you. Thank you for visiting, and I will leave the rest to the soldier at the guardhouse. ...By the way, how did you like the root beer float?”

“It was great,” Kino replied, and bowed. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” the officer replied, and left.

Once the officer was gone, the woman continued where she had left off. “I came all this way because I wanted to thank you, Traveler.”

“Thank me? For what?”

The woman smiled. “You were right. Thank you for turning down my request yesterday.”

Kino let the woman continue.

“I realized thanks to you that people have to solve their own problems. This problem was between me and my husband, so we had to work it out amongst ourselves. I’m not going to wait for god anymore. I’ll work for my happiness instead of waiting blindly for it. By the way, I wanted to give you a gift to remember our country by. Just give me one moment,” the woman said, and pulled on her husband’s ear. “I’ll be right back, Honey. Don’t do anything to offend the traveler.”

The man stayed silent.

"I can't hear you!" the woman yelled into his ear.

The man cringed in pain. "I-I won't."

"Oh, and give me your wallet. I'll take care of the finances from now on so you don't have to think about all these trivial things. Okay?"

"Yes..."

The woman let go. The man's head dropped back down to the ground. His glasses came off.

The woman fished out his wallet from his pocket and went into a nearby store with a spring in her step.

Indifferently, Kino watched the man slowly sit up.

The man was sitting on the ground. Blood was soaking the bandages around his head. He gave Kino a desperate stare. "T-Traveler...I have a request," he said feebly.

"What is it?"

"Please kill that woman."

"What woman?" Kino repeated plainly.

The man trembled, his tone rising. "My wife! Just between us, Traveler, outlanders are not charged with any crime as long as they leave the country immediately. I-I'll be charged with telling you this, of course, but that doesn't matter! So please! Please shoot my wife! I'll give you anything!"

"Well, Kino?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to refuse."

The man was on the verge of tears. And he indeed broke down crying.

Head bowed, he muttered between sobs, "Why...why me? I just don't understand... What did I do to deserve this? Did I hurt her feelings? Or do most wives suddenly turn violent for no reason?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been married."

"Ah..." The man sniffled several times. "I always did my best to be a good husband. I came home early from work every day to spend more time with her, even turning down invitations from friends, I spent weekends at home with her and tried the things she enjoyed."

Kino and Hermes were silent.

"It wasn't all fun, of course, but I wanted to have a good relationship with her, so I told myself to be patient and endure for her sake. And I thought I made her happy. So how did things come to this? She just lost her mind last night. Do I take her to a hospital? I just don't understand..."

"Have you ever done anything to make her angry?" Kino asked.

"No... Or at least, not that I can think of."

"Or hit her, maybe?" Hermes asked.

The man shook his head. But suddenly he became more talkative. "Well... I hit her a few times, when she stubbornly insisted that she was right when she was wrong. But not very hard, of course! I could never hit a woman at full strength! I —"

His frame suddenly bent sideways.

"Gah!"

The man's glasses went flying and he landed face-first on the ground. The woman had returned and kicked him in the right arm.

Ignoring her husband, the woman handed Kino a small paper bag. "Here. Go on, open it."

Kino looked inside. A thin metal plate with a ring, engraved with a pair of parrots leaning together. She showed it to Hermes.

"It's a charm. I didn't want to get you anything too big for traveling."

"Thank you. What is this charm for?" Kino asked.

The woman smiled and replied, "For a happy marriage. These are called 'lovebirds', and they mate for life. It's what you call a happily married couple. I hope you'll find a wonderful partner of your own someday."

"Thank you," Kino replied with an indescribable expression. Then she pushed Hermes through the open gates. When she turned, she saw the woman hitting the man several times.

"Have a look at this!" the soldier at the guardhouse said from behind the window, holding up a panel displaying photos of several men and their profiles.

"What's this?" Kino asked.

"Glad you asked! This is the culmination of our country's pride and joy, the results of our domestically-developed matchmaking questionnaire. A list of men whom we found to be most compatible with you!"

"What?"

"Oh! Let's see!" Hermes exclaimed.

The soldier tilted the panel so Hermes could see as well. "Remember the questionnaire you filled out when you first came to our country? We used that information to analyze your character from a range of perspectives and picked out several single men in our country with matching values, lifestyles, interests, and more!"

"Why?"

The soldier smiled. "If you'd like to meet them, we could grant you an extra month's stay at our country. And if you end up marrying one of them, you will receive citizenship here, no strings attached."

Kino was silent. "That's amazing!" Hermes responded in her place.

"Isn't it? You're very lucky, Kino. We happen to be running a matchmaking campaign right now. This offer doesn't come every day. What do you say? It's your once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Those on the road have much fewer chances to meet attractive people."

"Yeah. And Kino shoots some of them, which doesn't really help. Sometimes they run away screaming. I get anxious just watching."

Hermes seemed to be having fun. The soldier continued. "What do you say, Kino? According to a survey we conducted, 67% of single men and 82% of single women agree that marriage will make them happier. On the other hand, 43% of

single men and only 29% of single women believe that they do not have to be active in their search for a mate. Why not try rethinking your lifestyle and giving this offer a go? We can also offer you about 50 profiles per week from the thousands of men in our database. We also host two parties a week, sponsored by the government—which means the parties are hosted in nowhere other than the national VIP Hall! come hear the National Orchestra play, and sometimes even the Prime Minister will give an encouraging speech!”

Kino was silent.

“What do you say? According to one scholar, humans cannot survive without relying on one another. And one poet once wrote, ‘Marriage is the smallest and most perfect group created by humans’. A famous saying goes, ‘Marriage halves your sorrows and doubles your joys’.”

Kino was silent.

“Frankly speaking, don’t you find it quite problematic to discuss life without having been married? Marriage is the goal and true starting point of life. Your entire life until now has merely been practice for marriage. A rehearsal, if you will.”

Kino was silent.

“You may still be young, Kino, but if you don’t start now, you’ll end up a spinster before you know it. Now sign this contract and seek out your soulmate in our country!”

Kino took her fingers off her temple and looked up. And she said quietly,

“Did you know that nothing I do here is punishable by the law?”

“Have a safe journey!” the soldier cried with a cheerful smile. The guardhouse window slammed shut.

Kino shook her head several times before straddling Hermes and starting the engine. She put on her goggles.

“Let’s go, Hermes.”

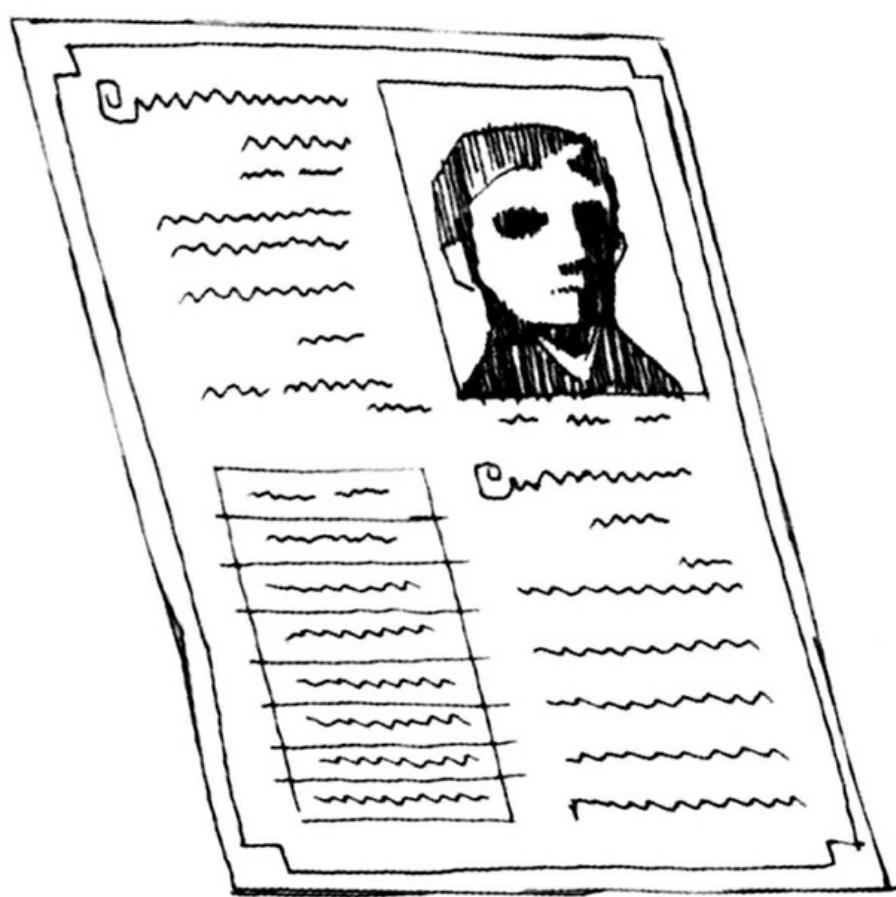
“Not gonna get married?” Hermes joked.

Kino replied, “I think traveling is the safer option.”

“True.”

As Hermes started moving, Kino looked up at the towering walls and muttered,

“Have a good marriage.”





Chapter 4: :Tradition" -Tricksters-

Kino and Hermes visited a small country.

Deep in the densely wooded mountains was a village surrounding a humble little castle. The ivy-coated ramparts surrounded an area tiny enough to circle on a leisurely afternoon stroll.

Kino knocked on the gates and asked to go through entry procedures.

The soldier at the gate was in traditional dress uniform and a helmet. He could not have been happier to hear that Kino and Hermes had never visited the country before.

Picking up the receiver, the soldier made a telephone call. A bell began to toll from inside the walls.

“Our country almost never gets visitors, so I’m just informing my fellow countrymen about you. We’ll throw you the best welcoming party you’ve seen,” the soldier said with a smile.

Soon, the gates opened. Kino pushed Hermes inside. Indeed, they were greeted by a large crowd.

Kino and Hermes were stunned.

The villagers were wearing fake ears on the tops their heads. Two symmetrical ears per person, triangular just like a cat’s.

“Welcome to our country! It’s so good of you to visit!” said a middle-aged man, who seemed to be the leader. He offered Kino a handshake on behalf of the people. His hair was combed back neatly and also topped with a set of brown cat ears.

After introducing themselves, Kino and Hermes were led by the leader—the head of the country—to his office in the castle.

A secretary wearing purple ears served them tea and left the room. The man described the history of the country.

He explained that the castle and the village around it were originally built for

a certain royal family to use as a vacation home. That even after the collapse of the dynasty, the people who lived in the area continued to live in prosperity.

They had a small population, but life in the country was peaceful. And the people abided by the tradition of wearing cat ears on their heads.

“This custom comes from the wisdom of the ancients. Cat ears draw out all of our potential adorableness, you see. Even if someone were to get angry, one look at these wiggling ears and he would end up smiling before he knew it. Isn’t it wonderful?” the man pontificated, his ears wiggling all the while. He explained that the people only took off the ears when they styled their hair or grew out of their old ones.

The office was decorated with an old oil painting. It featured a nude woman wearing an elegant smile and a pair of cat ears.

“While you’re here, Kino,” said the man, “why not try taking part in our tradition?”

“What do you mean?” Kino asked.

The man took out a dictionary-sized box from his desk and opened it. Kino peered in and found a pair of black cat ears.

“Wouldn’t you feel isolated being the only one here without them? We can lend you a pair you can wear during your visit. They’re black, just like your hair. We won’t force you, of course, but I think they’ll look splendid on you.”

“He looked pretty disappointed, Kino. You know, it’s not too late to change your mind,” said Hermes.

It was the afternoon of their second day in the country. Kino was taking a leisurely stroll down the narrow streets, pushing Hermes. She had left her things in the room provided to her free of charge, but brought along the black cat ears from the previous day.

Passing children waved at Kino and Hermes. Their colorful ears shook each time they moved their heads.

“Where’re your ears, Traveler?” they asked innocently.

The chubby restaurant manager who served Kino tea and a meal remarked,

"My, you're a lovely young person. But you would look so much better with a pair of cat ears."

A child pointed at Kino as she looked around the castle. "Mommy, he's not wearing his ears."

"Hush, now. That's a traveler. People from other countries aren't like us. They don't have to wear ears," the mother said.

A middle-aged woman Kino met on the street assured Kino that she would be more popular with men if she wore a pair of cat ears. "In our country, all you need to be popular are a flattering pair of ears. When I was a young lady, I would spend hours in front of the mirror trying to make mine look as lovely as possible," she said, and offered to teach Kino her secrets.

That evening, the country held a celebration to welcome Kino and Hermes. They performed a traditional cat-ear dance, standing in a circle with hands curled like paws as they moved to an upbeat rhythm.

As Kino enjoyed the dance from the sidelines, someone suggested that she also put on her ears and dance.

"I'm afraid I have two left feet. I wouldn't want to step on any toes," she replied, turning down the offer. "But I love the dance. It's splendid. I'm very glad that I came to this country."

The next morning.

Kino and Hermes left the country, seen off by men, women, and children wearing cat ears.

Once they had passed out of sight, the leader pulled the brown ears off his head with a hint of disappointment. The others also went their own ways, pulling off their ears.

The secretary went up the leader and received his ears. She also took off her own and dropped them in a net basket labeled 'Returns'.

"She didn't fall for it to the end," the secretary said to the leader.

"Indeed she didn't. Ring the bell and let everyone know it's finished."

"I've already given the orders, sir."

"That's 549 victories to 233 losses. Three victories and eight losses during my term. Hm...travelers aren't as gullible as they used to be."

"Unfortunately."

"Oh well. Now, what should we try next time? We'll choose a theme and start the preparations immediately. Get a new painting for my office, too..."

Kino and Hermes were going down a path in the woods.

"I can't believe it was cat ears. It made everyone look adorable, and I almost burst out laughing so many times. The dance was a masterpiece too," Kino chuckled.

"You should have tried on the ears too. It would have looked good on you."

"No thanks. It's not like me to play along like that."

"Where's your sense of professionalism?" Hermes asked without an ounce of humor. "Sometimes you have to break out of character to get popular."

"What are you talking about? ...Anyway, it's like those people have a wellspring of ideas. Which ones have I heard about so far? Putting on turtle shells, wearing lion tails, walking like birds, greeting people with wild dances, bursting into tears when meeting someone, singing at the dinner table..."

"Wearing feathers in their hair, hopping around everywhere and entering rooms right-foot first, eating with their left hands while pointing at the sky, painting their eyelids white, giving a thumbs-up while saying 'Yeah!' instead of waving to say hi."

"Right. I'm going to tell my story to other travelers too. That way they can refuse to play along if they don't want to. That was really one fun experience," Kino said, smiling.

"Aww, you're going to rain on their parade if you do that," Hermes groaned.

"Come to think of it, the traveler from half a year ago was really the best sport," the leader said out of the blue as he sat in his office.

"I remember him, sir. That was when we were a people with the long tradition of wearing apples on our heads, no? He even joined us in the apple dance," the secretary replied.

The leader reminisced nostalgically. "Never have I seen someone who played along with such gusto. He had an appreciation for tradition, the young man. I'd bet you that he had a good upbringing. ...I do wish we had more travelers like him dropping by."

The secretary smiled. "He was the one in the green sweater who drove here on a buggy, right?"



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Chapter 5: "The Country Where Work is Unnecessary" -Workable-

"What a beautiful country," the traveler said, stepping through the gates.

The traveler was in her mid-teens with short black hair. She was in a long brown coat.

"Yeah. It's been a while since we visited such a clean, modern country. Even the entry procedures were all automated," said the motorrad the traveler was pushing. The motorrad was laden with travel gear.

Sprawling before them was a well-kept city. Wide, clean streets reached into the distance, and green parks dotted the area. Beautiful buildings arranged in sensible layouts stood in the center of the country.

The setting sun cast a beautiful glow on the skyline's functional beauty, creating a spectacular view.

"Now what, Kino?" asked the motorrad.

The traveler called Kino replied, "We can look around tomorrow. For now, let's find a place to stay the night."

"Sure."

At that moment, a truck stopped in front of them. No one was driving it.

A machine affixed to the truck said, "Please load your vehicle and step inside. This truck will take you to your destination."

When Kino asked how much it would cost, the machine replied that the service was free of charge.

"What do you say, Hermes? Should we get a lift?"

The motorrad called Hermes replied, "Yeah. It'll be faster than finding a hotel ourselves."

"All right."

Kino made to push Hermes around to the back of the truck, but the truck beat

her to the punch and automatically pulled him onto the bed with a crane. Belts locked his wheels into place.

"Wow," Hermes exclaimed.

Kino sat in the back seat. Her seat belts were also automatically clasped. Only when Kino and Hermes were both securely fastened did the truck begin to move.

The truck drove down the wide streets, keeping a fixed distance from the other vehicles on the road. In the cars, Kino could see children on their way home from playing in the parks.

The truck made its way to the city center, where the buildings were clustered.

Soon it stopped in front of a large, clean hotel. A robot came out the doors to greet Kino. Her stay would also be free of charge.

Kino and Hermes switched to a smaller vehicle and were led to their room.

The robot bellboy wished them a pleasant stay and left.

"Everything is so convenient here," Kino said, hanging her coat on the back of her chair. Underneath the coat, she had been wearing a black jacket. On her right thigh was a large hand persuader, and an automatic persuader was secured behind her back.

"We don't need to do anything for ourselves here," said Hermes.

Kino began unpacking her things. "I've heard about this place before. They say that technology is so advanced that people don't need to work. Humans have don't have to do anything."

"Huh. So what do they do here? Sing and dance every day?"

"Who knows?" Kino replied, tilting her head. "It doesn't seem like that other country where people lived in isolation from one another. So they must be doing something here, at least. We'll look into it tomorrow. I can't wait."

"If you like what you see, are you gonna settle down here?" Hermes asked.

The next day, Kino rose at dawn.

As usual, she did her exercises, and did drills with her persuaders before

maintaining them. Then she took a shower, had breakfast, and smacked Hermes awake a little earlier than usual. He grumbled.

When Kino made to start Hermes outside the hotel, yet another automated truck came to them.

"I don't need to do anything here. My engine's going to rust over soon," Hermes said, although it was not clear if he was happy or upset.

The truck asked Kino for a destination. Kino replied that she wanted to go somewhere where people gathered. The truck said that she needed to be more specific.

Kino thought for a moment before saying,

"Please take me where the people in this country go in the morning."

The truck acknowledged her request and began driving further into the concrete jungle at the center of the country.

As they neared the orderly buildings, Kino and Hermes noticed that there were more and more cars on the road. Inside the cars were men and women in suits and ties. None of them looked particularly happy.

Soon, the truck stopped in the middle of the buildings. Kino and Hermes disembarked. Other people were doing the same, walking with hurried steps into the buildings. Empty vehicles left and made way for other vehicles carrying people.

Kino watched it all for a time before turning to Hermes. "What do you make of this?"

"They're people coming to work. It's just another morning rush hour," Hermes said.

"That's what it looks like, isn't it?" Kino said, confused.

"But don't the people here not have to work?"

"That's what I heard."

Kino looked around and spoke to a middle-aged man who happened to get off a car nearby. But the man brushed her off and disappeared into a building,

saying he was busy.

"They all look like they have work to do," Hermes remarked. Kino tried to enter one of the buildings to ask for more information, but the machine at the entrance stopped her politely, saying entry was restricted to authorized personnel.

Soon, the morning rush hour came to an end. Kino and Hermes were alone on the streets.

"What now?" asked Hermes.

Kino fell into thought. Then she opened her mouth to speak, when a car stopped nearby. The door opened and a young man rushed outside.

The man tried to enter one of the buildings, but was denied entry. He walked away, shoulders slumping.

"Perfect. Let's ask him."

"You're a traveler?" asked the dejected man. He was in his early 20s and wearing a suit with a tie.

Kino, Hermes, and the man were sitting on a bench by a fountain in a park near the cluster of buildings. No one else was around. The man had brought Kino there because it was a quiet enough place to talk.

The man called to a robot in the area and ordered beverages. Then he put a card into a slot in the robot, saying that this was how the people in the country made payments. Soon, the robot served them both tea. Kino's was free.

"You want to know what I do in there?" the man asked, taking a sip.

"Yes."

"I work there every day. That's my occupation," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. They wouldn't let me in because I was late today. Argh, I can't believe I slept in..." he groaned, but quickly cheered up. "No crying over spilled milk, I guess. I'm not going to let this happen again."

"But I thought that machines did everything for you here and you didn't need

to work," Hermes wondered.

The man nodded, but replied, "But we still have to occupy ourselves."

Kino gave him a quizzical look.

The man replied, "Ah, I see. Let me explain. This 'occupation' I'm talking about is a little different from 'work'."

"You mean that your 'occupation' isn't making or selling or providing a service for other people?" Kino guessed.

"Yeah. That's how things were in the old days, but we don't need to do that here. The machines take care of all that stuff. Well, you'll always have artists and musicians doing things only humans can do, but most people—paper-pushers like me—don't have to work."

Kino nodded. "That makes sense. Then what do the people do here? And why do you occupy yourselves like this?"

The man nodded as he considered Kino's questions. Then he replied, "To make money, first of all. We have a guaranteed basic standard of living, so you don't have to have any money to survive. You can get what you need at government-run facilities and they provide you with clothes and enough food to get by on. But that's no different from life in a prison. With more money, you could live in a big house, wear nice clothes, and eat good food. And if you want to make more money, you have to work more. It's just something you have to do if you want to really live."

"Hm." "I see."

"As for what I do at the office..."

"Yes?"

"I get stressed."

"What?" Kino asked.

"I get stressed. Physically too, but mostly mental stress. It keeps me from getting comfortable. That's what people here occupy themselves with."

The man put down his paper cup next to the bench. A cleaning robot came

over to retrieve it. The man continued. “It’s about the same for everyone because most people here are office workers. Here’s how it works with me. First, I dress perfectly for work and get to the office by a certain time. Then the morning assembly begins and I have to listen to the president droning on and on. The president’s speech doesn’t have any real content. It’s just a bunch of sentences with fancy words I have to listen to while standing up straight. It’s tough. Tough for the president too, probably. After that, I get scolded by my boss. Our machines decide at random what I get scolded for. Yesterday, it was because we had terrible weather over the weekend. After that, I do a bunch of things. Fix up mistakes in documents, do meaningless calculations, ask a favor from someone whose occupation is to refuse things... And sometimes, coworkers whose personalities have been calculated to be incompatible have to insult each other’s necktie choices. Once in a while, I have to apologize profusely when people whose occupations are ‘customers’ come in to complain about our products.”

Kino and Hermes listened in silence.

“Some people order me to bring in something they don’t need from the warehouse and make me wait for hours on purpose. And when I come back to deliver it, they make me wait even longer. Sometimes I have to go door-to-door and just walk on and on all day, or play sports I don’t enjoy with my boss. Then I have to brown-nose like crazy even if the boss sucks. Sometimes I get ordered to take a 10-seater bus with 20 people inside. The women at work get sexually harassed or spend all day making tea and photocopies. And there’s more. But either way, the work you do and the amount of stress you get decides your pay. People with full-time nine-to-five occupations have different work and pay ranges from people who have part-time half-day occupations. And even people in the same field get paid and stressed differently depending on their experience. People with more experience get important occupations that stress them out more. I’m still just a newbie, so my occupation is mostly about trivial things. I wish I could start making more money.”

Kino asked, “How long has this system been around?”

“I don’t know. Since before I was born.”

“Have people gotten hurt or sick because of it?”

"Sure. Stomach ulcers, hair loss, insomnia, ruined skin, chronic snacking, hallucinations, murder, and even suicide. But most people are fine. They use their free time to de-stress. Like by going out drinking with the coworkers after work. We're all right."

"Why do you have to be stressed to make money?" asked Hermes.

"I don't know. I have no idea who came up with this idea, but..." the man shrugged, "Don't you think it's a great system?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. People can't be idle all the time. We get lazy if we don't struggle a bit every day. We need something in life to keep us on our toes. In the old days, surviving kept us stressed. But now it's our occupations. I understand why our ancestors came up with this system. If we left everything to the machines and spent our time doing nothing but indulging ourselves, we'll ruin our country. But the system keeps the people moving and pays them for their efforts. It's like two birds with one stone."

"Do you like your lifestyle, then? Isn't your occupation difficult?" asked Kino.

"I like it. I mean, it's tough sometimes. But it's kind of my responsibility to society, you know? I think it's really great to do your civic duty by being stressed every day. I was a minor until last year, so I used to just laze around the house every day. Sometimes I depressed myself, thinking about putting on a suit and tie and going out to work in a year's time. But now I like the tension of daily life. I feel like a real member of society, like a person in my own right. I still remember how my parents smiled when I got my first paycheck. 'You're a real man now, my boy. I'm so proud of you,' my dad told me. I was so happy to hear that."

"That's sweet," said Hermes.

"One of my favorite sayings goes, 'Occupation is easier than relaxation, a day of relaxation can't compare with a day of occupation'. I really hope I'll be able to spend more days occupied than relaxed. Tiring myself out after a day of going out just doesn't feel as good as being tired after a long day being occupied, you know? I mean, all that stress is what makes me appreciate the free time I have. I want to keep going this way, and someday have a family of

my own and occupy myself with all I have, all for my family's sake. And I'm sure seeing them happy will blow all my stress away. I'll keep climbing the ladder until mandatory retirement age. Hopefully I'll make section chief, or an executive if I can. My real goal is president, though. It's my lifelong dream. And I can achieve my dream as long as I put in the effort. Isn't it wonderful? This system gives us purpose and joy in life."

The man looked up at the clear blue sky and smiled. Then he looked at Kino.

"If you're thinking to settle down at some point, I recommend this country. We offer occupations for everyone. Which means as long as you're occupied, you're guaranteed to be middle class at the very least, or higher if you work hard enough. We're always accepting immigrants, too. Does that answer your questions?"

"No. Thank you for explaining," Kino said with a smile.

"Nothing else you wanted to know about?"

Kino thought for a moment. "This has nothing to do with occupation, but I was curious about how everything here was provided to me free of charge. It was all covered by the state, correct? Then how do I pay for any supplies I might need on my travels?"

"I'm not sure. It might be a problem if you were going to stay a long time, but since you're just visiting for a few days, most things should be free. They don't issue cards for travelers and bartering isn't easy here. Ask the machines in the stores and they can tell you more."

"I see. Thank you. I've been needing to do some shopping."

"No problem. I'd better get going. Get home, prepare to occupy myself tomorrow, and maybe study up on something. I suggest you go to the shopping center in the central district. It's pretty close by car and there's nothing you can't find there. Bye now."

Kino said goodbye to the man, who turned and walked away.

Still sitting on the bench, Kino ordered more tea. And she sat back, taking relaxed sips as she looked out at the towering buildings and the deserted park.

"What now, Kino? Some sightseeing?" asked Hermes.

Kino's gaze remained fixed forward. "Hermes...what that man said was exactly what I needed to hear. Now I know what to do."

Hermes was floored by Kino's sudden show of gravity. "Wh-what? Don't tell me you decided to settle here."

"Of course not," Kino replied, turning. "We're going shopping."

"What?"

"He says everything's free. Gunpowder, fuel, clothes, and valuables we can sell off someplace else. This is our chance. We'll shop as much as we can today and tomorrow before we leave."

Hermes was silenced. Kino rose to her feet, and went to the cleaning robot to give it her empty paper cup.

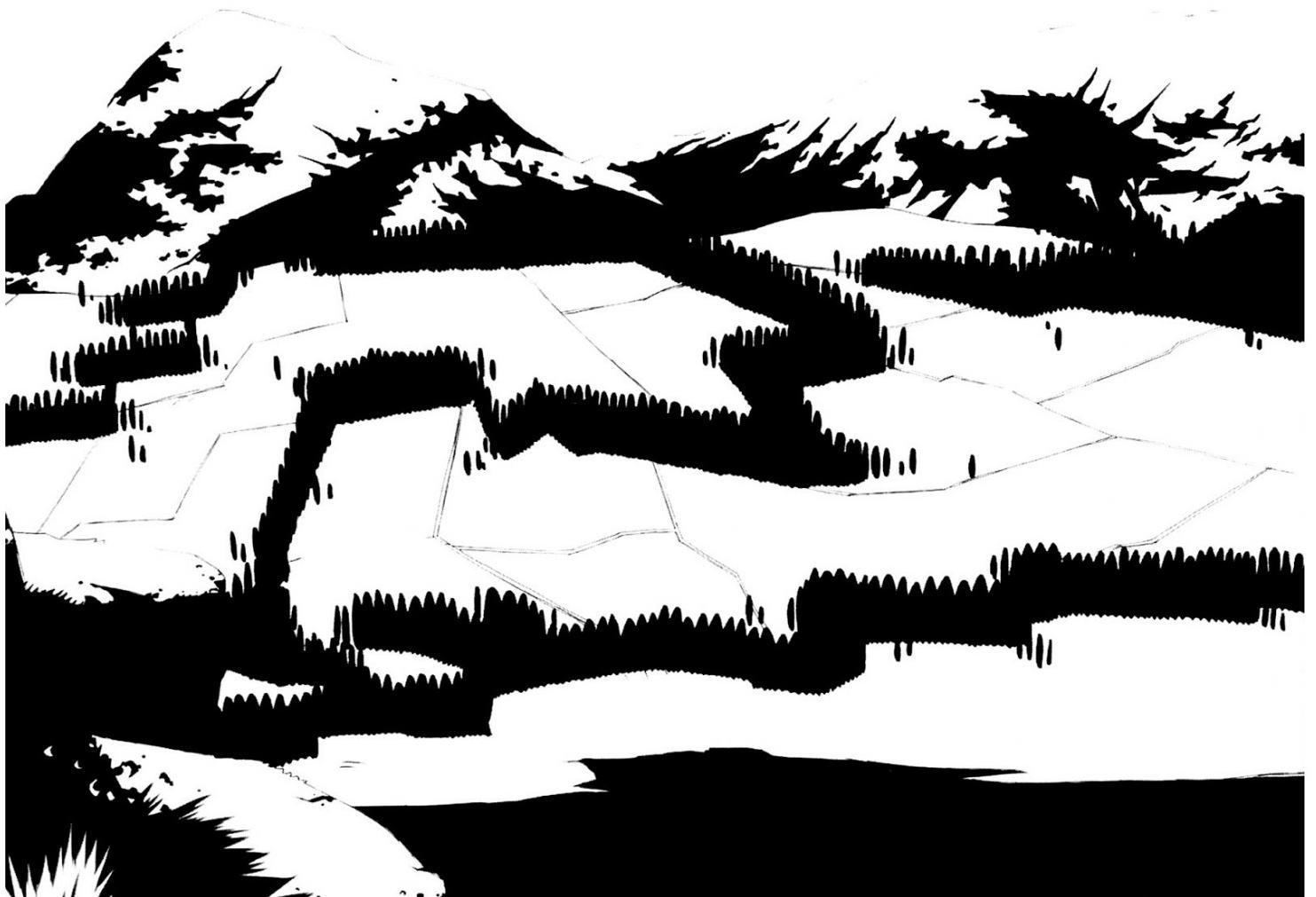
"Let's go, Hermes. It's important for humans to indulge in comforts while they can. Like right now," she declared, returning to Hermes.

"Like master, like student," he mumbled.

"What did you say?" Kino asked, pushing him forward.

Hermes replied, "Nothing."

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Chapter 6: "The Divided Country" -A World Divided-

The road forked in two directions.

One branch went uphill to a forest in the highlands to the north.

The other went downhill to the distant blue sea in the south.

"Which way, Kino?" asked the motorrad stopped at the fork. Its luggage rack was laden with travel gear that threatened to spill over the sides of its rear wheel.

"I don't know," mumbled Kino, the human next to the motorrad. She was in her mid-teens with short black hair and fair features. A pair of goggles hung from around her neck, and she was holding a brown coat.

Kino wore a black jacket and a thick belt around her waist. Strapped to her right thigh was a holstered hand persuader, and an automatic persuader was secured behind her back.

She turned. Behind her stood towering ramparts and a closed gate.

The walls extended north and disappeared into the mountains. They also extended south and disappeared down the hill. The walls did not seem to be surrounding a country, making it hard for Kino to tell if they were inside one or outside.

"It's a big country. I wish we had a map," Kino said, rolling up her coat. "Anyway, Hermes, what do you say to the sea? Just a hunch, but I think we'll find people there."

The motorrad called Hermes replied, "It's up to you."

Kino tied her coat to the luggage rack and started Hermes. Then she put on her hat and goggles and slowly rode towards the shore.

They traveled down the slope for some time and eventually spotted the beach—and a village.

That was when a hovercraft glided over from down the hill, carrying several men. It quickly swerved and descended, turning to follow Hermes side-by-side.

"Are you a traveler?" asked the man in the cargo hold, shouting over the buzzing engine.

Kino nodded. The man gestured wildly as he pointed at the village.

"Welcome! Do drop by our village; it's just down that way!"

Kino nodded several times and held up her left thumb. The men on the hovercraft waved. The hovercraft accelerated and went ahead to the village.

Kino and Hermes reached the seaside village. On the left-hand side was a breakwater encircling the beach, and the dazzling blue sea. The streets were lined with white houses. Many villagers waved from their windows when they spotted Kino and Hermes.

The harbor plaza was already packed. Kino rode in and stopped Hermes. All eyes were on them.

"Welcome to our village, Traveler! It's been a long time since we last had visitors," said an old man who seemed to be the village elder.

"Thank you. My name is Kino, and this is my partner Hermes," Kino replied, taking off her hat. Hermes also greeted the villagers.

The old man introduced himself as the elder and ushered Kino to a gazebo housing a bench. They sat side-by-side, propping up Hermes on his side stand.

As the villagers watched, the elder explained that he would provide Kino with food and a place to stay, free of charge. She was an esteemed guest.

When the elder asked if she had any questions, Kino asked why the automated gates had no map, and why the road forked in two.

A sad look crossed the elder's eyes. "You see, our country is divided. Half the people live here on the shore, and the other half live in the mountains."

"Why?" asked Hermes.

"Well...I suppose you could say we have different viewpoints. We have practically no contact because our country is so large. It's quite embarrassing to tell you all this; this division should never have happened in the first place," the elder said, and abruptly changed the subject. "By the way, is there any food you cannot eat, Traveler?"

Kino thought for a moment before shaking her head.

"Any allergies, perhaps?"

"None."

The elder smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. Our country doesn't make a habit of decadent meals, but sometimes we make exceptions," he said.

The elder waved his hands at the people surrounding the gazebo. Everyone looked on expectantly.

"And what better occasion for an exception than a celebration? Of course, we understand if you would prefer something more quiet."

But Kino understood what the villagers wanted, and nodded. "You'd like to throw a party to welcome us here, you mean."

Everyone's eyes glinted.

"That's correct," the elder said, a mischievous look rising to his stern face.

Kino rose. She looked around at the people and said to the elder,

"It would be an honor."

Cheers erupted around the gazebo.

Kino and Hermes were led to a room with a view of the sea.

As soon as she had finished unloading Hermes, a messenger from the elder came to ask if she wanted to watch the villagers hunt. Their fishermen were about to go out to sea on their hovercrafts to hunt large game for the party.

Kino accepted wholeheartedly, remarking that it sounded interesting, and asked if Hermes wanted to join.

"Sure. Not like I have anything better to do," he replied. Kino pushed him along.

Several hovercrafts were parked in the harbor. Kino and Hermes boarded one of them.

The crafts floated low and glided over the calm waters. The one carrying Kino and Hermes followed.

"We're going for a big one today. It's going to be a very wild hunt," said the young man who was assigned as Kino's guide. She looked down and saw the men taking out tools from the crates onboard. The tools were long, thin pipes about as long as a child was tall. The pipes were equipped with handles and padding so they could be mounted on the shoulder, and had thick conical objects at the ends.

"This is a weapon we use to launch metal bits filled with gunpowder towards our targets. It's called a rocket launcher, and people supposedly used it in war in the past. Mostly to destroy sturdy things like cars and vehicles."

"And you use it for hunting?" asked Kino.

"That's right. We're gunning for something you couldn't catch without one." The guide grinned.

At that moment, the man at the pilot's seat shouted, "There! On the left!"

A waterspout gushed into the air like a fountain. The hovercrafts scattered and surrounded the area. The one carrying Kino and Hermes ascended slightly. One man leaned off the side and waved a flag to signal the direction.

A massive black shadow slowly began to move under the craft.

It was a gigantic animal. The animal had a streamlined body with large fins that slowly moved up and down as it made its way forward. It was several times longer than the hovercraft.

"It's huge," Kino whispered.

"This animal is called a whale. It's the largest creature in the sea. Have you ever seen one before?"

"In books, yes. But it's much bigger than I expected."

"Who knew we'd get to see one for free?" Hermes quipped.

"You're in for something better. We're hunting this beast."

The hovercrafts broke formation, splitting left and right and dropping several small cylinders on either side of the whale.

The cylinders exploded. Waterspouts rose around the whale and deep

impacts shook the air.

The whale began writhing. Its fins drummed madly against the water and its head broke the surface.

At that moment, the hovercraft flying at the center of the formation launched a rocket at the whale. The rocket drew a white arc in the air and landed precisely on the whale's exposed head.

Its head exploded.

Flesh and blood scattered and loudly splattered against the waves.

The massive creature twisted and squirmed one last time before it finally stopped moving. Red water began to envelop its body.

"We did it!"

The villagers on the hovercrafts, including the guide, cheered.

Several people holding ropes jumped out of the crafts. They tied the ropes around the whale's tail fin and secured them to several of the hovercrafts.

The gigantic corpse was towed to land, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

The headless whale was pulled up to the pier by the plaza. The villagers preparing for the party cheered.

Soon they got to work on cleaning the catch. It involved dragging a gigantic sickle down the whale's body, using a hovercraft. The harbor was dyed black with its blood.

The pieces of the whale were loaded onto trucks and taken to the plaza. Even those were so large that people had to cut them into smaller pieces.

Finally, the meat was divided into three portions. The elder explained, "The portion by the tent is for the feast tonight. The portion on the trucks is for making into jerky. And as for the rest..."

He pointed at the mountain of meat, bones, and innards piled up on a large piece of canvas. Much of the portion looked edible.

"This is for our friends."

"Who?" asked Kino.

"They're not here at the moment. I'll introduce you later," the elder replied with a smile.

"Now, let's begin the feast!" the elder declared, and everyone in the plaza dug in.

People served dishes to the elder and Kino, who was sitting next to him. Young women and muscular men were busily going around in their aprons. The elder explained that skilled cooks were considered most attractive in their country.

"Go on, do have a taste," he suggested.

On some plates were large, live shrimp served with their shells cut open. Their heads and legs twitched on occasion. On other plates were fish with only their heads, bones, and tails, served with pieces of their own flesh. The mouth and gills gaped silently, never to reach the sea alive.

One person placed live shrimp and clams on a coal oven. The shrimp and clams squirmed for a time before they started foaming.

The villagers also served steak made from the catch of the day. It was served rare—well-done was considered overcooked—and blood was pooling on the plate.

Kino looked down at the dish.

"I don't believe this," Hermes groaned.

Kino lay in bed in her jacket, exhaling.

"That was so good..."

"I can't believe you literally ate until you dropped," Hermes said.

Kino kept her eyes on the ceiling. "I read in a book once that a good traveler knows to stuff themselves at every given opportunity. It's a life skill."

"Really?"

It was getting late; the sky was growing dark outside. They could hear people in the plaza putting away tables and chairs.

"Kino? Are you awake?" someone asked, knocking on the door. "I'm here with

a message from the elder. We're about to give some of the whale meat to our friends, if you'd like to come and watch."

The sea was sparkling gold under the setting sun. Two hovercrafts flew low over the waves.

Kino, Hermes, and the elder were on one of them. The other was carrying something underneath it—a large, rolled up canvas secured with a rope. It contained the remainder of the whale meat.

The hovercrafts stopped in the middle of the sea.

"Here is our gift," the elder said, standing on the deck, and gave a signal.

The rope securing one side of the canvas came undone, and the meat inside came rolling down. Pieces of the whale scattered on the waves.

Soon, schools of fish came swarming. Creatures of all kinds joined the frenzy, working up splashes on the water's surface. Birds also began flying in.

"Our friends," said the elder. "Creatures who survive on the sacrifices of others, just like us."

"So that's who this was for," Kino said, casually looking down. She seemed to be satisfied.

The elder followed her gaze. "Yes. Now our friends will grow, and other creatures will feed on them, and they in turn will be fed upon by other creatures. The sea is full of friends. They keep any one species from growing too numerous or few. Normally, we take their lives and give nothing in return. But we do what we can, at least after our celebrations."

"I see..." Kino said, slowly walking to the edge of the deck and looking up at the western sky. The sun was an orange mass, barely touching the horizon.

The hovercraft turned and headed back to the village, its long shadow trailing behind.

That night, Kino joined the elder and the villagers for tea.

When the elder asked what she had planned for the next day, she replied that she was going to visit the highlands in the north.

The elder and the villagers loudly tried to dissuade her.

"You mustn't!"

When Kino asked if the people in the north were dangerous, they shook their heads. The elder finally said, "No, they wouldn't harm you. But..." he said sadly, "they are cruel people. We cannot accept their practices."

"What do you mean?" Kino asked. The elder slowly shook his head.

And he replied, "But I suppose it can't hurt for you to go in person and witness their cruelty with your own eyes."

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn. As usual, she did her exercises, and did drills with her persuaders before maintaining them.

She was served a full breakfast at the elder's home, and even received some fish jerky for the road. Kino gave the elder her heartfelt thanks.

Kino and Hermes went up the slope from the previous day.

They traveled past the gate in the east and up the slope for some time and eventually spotted the dense forest—and a village. That was when, just like the previous day, a hovercraft glided over and began to follow Hermes side-by-side.

"Are you a traveler?" asked the man in the cargo hold.

Kino and Hermes reached the forest village. On the right-hand side was a deep green wood, surrounding streets lined with white houses. Many villagers waved from their windows when they spotted Kino and Hermes.

The plaza with the watchtower was already packed. Kino rode in and stopped Hermes. All eyes were on them.

The elder welcomed the first visitors to the village in a very long time, and offered to provide Kino and Hermes free housing and food during their stay. Kino thanked him.

"By the way," said the elder, "is there any food you cannot eat, Traveler?"

"No, and I don't have any allergies. And I don't mind large celebrations, either," Kino said without missing a beat. Everyone's eyes glinted.

"I don't believe this," Hermes groaned to himself.

"We're about to go hunt game for the feast tonight. Would you like to come take a look?"

Kino accepted wholeheartedly, and asked if Hermes wanted to join.

"Sure. Not like I have anything better to do," he replied. Kino pushed him onto a hovercraft.

The crafts floated low and glided through the forest. The one carrying Kino and Hermes followed.

"We're going for a big one today. It's going to be a very wild hunt," said the young man who was assigned as Kino's guide. She looked down and saw the men putting together rocket launchers.

"There! On the right!" someone shouted from the pilot's seat.

Something stirred in the woods. The hovercrafts scattered and surrounded the area. The one carrying Kino and Hermes ascended slightly. One man leaned off the side and waved a flag to signal the direction.

A massive black shadow slowly began to move under the craft.

It was a gigantic animal. The animal had a boulder-shaped body with a long, thin nose. Ears flapping, it moved forward on thick legs. It was twice as long as the hovercraft when measured from nose to tail.

"It's massive," Kino whispered.

"This animal is called an elephant. It's the largest creature in the forest. Have you ever seen one before?"

"In books, yes. But it's much bigger than I expected."

"Blah blah blah, rest omitted," Hermes said.

"You're in for something better. We're hunting this beast."

The hovercrafts broke formation, splitting left and right and dropping several small cylinders on either side of the elephant.

The cylinders exploded. Dirt flew into the air around the elephant and deep impacts shook the air.

The elephant began writhing and broke into a rampage. It soon rushed

straight into a clearing.

At that moment, the hovercraft flying right next to the elephant launched a rocket. The rocket drew a white arc in the air and landed precisely on the elephant's exposed head as it stomped out of the woods.

Its head exploded.

Flesh and blood scattered on the dirt.

The massive creature twisted and reared up one last time. Then it crashed loudly and finally stopped moving. Blood began pooling on the ground.

"We did it!"

The villagers on the hovercrafts, including the guide, cheered.

Several people holding ropes jumped out of the crafts. They tied the ropes around the elephant's legs and secured them to several of the hovercrafts.

The gigantic corpse was pulled into the air, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

The headless elephant was transported to the fountain in the plaza. The villagers preparing for the party cheered.

Soon they got to work on cleaning the catch. It involved dragging a gigantic sickle down the elephant's body, using a hovercraft. The plaza was dyed black with its blood.

The pieces of the elephant were loaded onto trucks and taken to the plaza. Even those were so large that people had to cut them into smaller pieces.

Finally, the meat was divided into three portions. The elder explained, "The portion by the tent is for the feast tonight. The portion on the trucks is for making into jerky. And as for the rest..."

He pointed at the mountain of meat, bones, and innards piled up on a large piece of canvas. Much of the portion looked edible.

"This is for our friends."

"Who?" asked Kino, smiling.

"They're not here at the moment. I'll introduce you later," the elder replied with a smile as well.

"Now, let's begin the feast!" the elder declared, and everyone in the plaza dug in.

People served dishes to the elder and Kino, who was sitting next to him. Young women and muscular men were busily going around in their aprons. The elder explained that skilled cooks were considered most attractive in their country.

"Go on, do have a taste," he suggested.

On some plates were whole roasted monkeys served with their bellies cut open and stuffed with spices. The monkeys' arms and legs stuck out into the air, making them look like infants.

On other plates were boiled sheep heads, brains oozing out of the skulls. Cloudy white eyes that would never see the light of day again stared from the plate, having been carved out of the heads.

Three live birds were brought to the side of the plaza. One person held down their necks with two thin sticks and chopped off their heads with an axe. The headless birds flapped and ran around for a time before quickly expiring. The elder explained that they would be fried later.

The villagers also served steak made from the catch of the day. It was served rare—well-done was considered overcooked—and blood was pooling on the plate.

Kino looked down at the dish.

"That's two days in a row," said Hermes.

Kino lay in bed in her jacket, exhaling.

"That was so good..."

"Sounds like you're having fun," Hermes snapped.

Kino did not move from her bed. "It's nice to come to countries like this sometimes. And you know, I never knew sheep brains tasted so good. I knew there was no sense in being a picky eater."

"Really?"

It was getting late; the sky was growing dark outside. They could hear people in the plaza putting away tables and chairs.

"Kino? Are you awake?" someone asked, knocking on the door. "I'm here with a message from the elder. We're about to give some of the elephant meat to our friends, if you'd like to come and watch."

Two hovercrafts flew over the dusky forest.

Kino, Hermes, and the elder were on one of them. The other was carrying something underneath it—a large, rolled up canvas secured with a rope. It contained the remainder of the elephant meat.

The hovercrafts stopped in the middle of the forest.

"Here is our gift," the elder said, standing on the deck, and gave a signal.

The rope securing one side of the canvas came undone, and the meat inside came rolling down. Pieces of the elephant scattered on the ground.

Soon, animals came swarming. From small creatures to birds and large predators. They all feasted on the meat.

"Our friends," said the elder. "Creatures who survive on the sacrifices of others, just like us."

"So that's who this was for," Kino said, casually looking down. She seemed to be satisfied.

The elder followed her gaze. "Yes. Now our friends will grow, and other creatures will feed on them, and they in turn will be fed upon by other creatures. The forest is full of friends. They keep any one species from growing too numerous or few. Normally, we take their lives and give nothing in return. But we do what we can, at least after our celebrations."

"I see..." Kino said, slowly walking to the edge of the deck and looking up at the western sky. The sun was an orange mass, barely touching the distant ridge.

The hovercraft turned and headed back to the village, its long shadow trailing behind.

That night, Kino joined the elder and the villagers for tea.

When the elder asked what she had done the previous day, she replied that she had gone to the seaside village in the south.

The elder and the villagers loudly voiced their anger.

"Aren't they the most heartless creatures?" the elder said sadly. "They are cruel people. They slaughter the lovely fish and shellfish in the sea without batting an eye. They serve them alive and cruelly feast on their living bodies. Even those clever, darling whales are no exception to them." He raised his voice. "And yet they have the gall to claim that it is wrong of us to hunt forest animals for our food. It's frankly outrageous. Do they not understand their own cruelty? We cannot accept their practices."

"I see. So that's why you're a divided country," Kino said.

The elder slowly nodded. "But I suppose it must have been a good experience for you to go in person and witness their cruelty with your own eyes."

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn. As usual, she did her exercises, and did drills with her persuaders before maintaining them.

She was served a full breakfast at the elder's home, and even received some meat jerky for the road. Kino gave the elder her heartfelt thanks.

Kino and Hermes were given a big send-off when they departed.

By the time they finished crossed the vast, empty country and reached the western gate, it was already almost evening.

Kino and Hermes passed through the automated gates and left the country.

"On to the next destination," Hermes sang.

"One second," Kino said feebly.

"Hm?"

"I'm hungry."

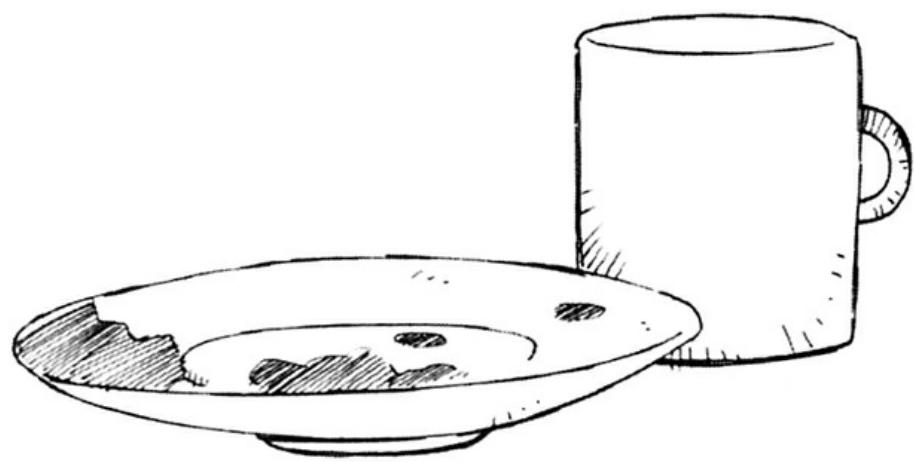
Hermes sighed. "I'm not surprised. Those feasts must've stretched out your stomach."

"Yeah. I'll have the jerky they gave me. We'll get going once I'm full."

Kino got off Hermes and propped him up on his stand.

"Sure, sure. Wouldn't want you to tip over because you fainted of hunger," Hermes said. "So which one's it gonna be? Mummified fish or mummified meat?"

Kino pulled the jerky out of her bag and replied, "Both."





Chapter 7: "Grapes" -On Duty-

"Hey, you," the man said out of the blue.

He was talking to a human drinking tea at an open-air cafe. She was in her mid-teens with short black hair, large eyes, and fair features. She wore a black jacket and a thick belt, and had a holstered hand persuader strapped to her right thigh.

The man was about 30 years of age. He was an ordinary man in ordinary clothes.

"Me?"

The man nodded. And he pointed at the motorrad propped up by the roadside, with compartments hanging from either side of its rear wheel.

"Is the motorrad yours? Are you a traveler?"

"Yes. We arrived here yesterday," the traveler replied, and introduced herself. "My name is Kino. This is my partner, Hermes."

"I see. So how long are you going to go on with this foolishness?" the man demanded, standing over the traveler.

"What do you mean?" Kino replied emotionlessly.

"Traveling on a motorrad. You're young. Shouldn't you be in school? Or working, if your country doesn't have higher education?"

"Well...it's hard to explain," Kino replied, shrinking slightly.

"Excuse me," the man said, and took a seat across from Kino. He glared. "You enjoy traveling?"

"Yes."

"Even though it's a waste of time?"

Kino was silent. The man sounded like a teacher scolding a misbehaving student.

"You may enjoy it now. But traveling won't help you in the future. All you get

are bragging rights. ‘I’ve been here. I’ve been there.’ And it might make you look free, but all I see is someone abandoning all responsibility. You’re just a vagrant.”

Kino sipped her tea in silence. The man continued.

“People have responsibilities. One is to work. To get a job and work in service of other people and the country, like a proper member of society. The second one’s more like a human duty: to marry and have children. To make your spouse happy, and raise kids who’ll go into the society you shape. Not something you could do on the road, am I wrong?”

“No,” Kino said, smiling.

The man sped up. “Which is why, like I said, traveling is a waste of time. It sounds harsh, I know, but I have the right to say this stuff because I’m a working man with a family to support. So I want you to take your life more seriously. That’s the whole reason I’m talking to you. For your own good.”

“Of course. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And one more thing,” said the man.

“Yes?”

“Get rid of that motorrad, too.”

“Really?” Kino asked.

“Yes, really. It’s dangerous, and only seats two. Outdated and barbaric, I say. A real adult doesn’t ride around something that worries his family. It would be self-centered. Switch to a car that actually fits all your loved ones. Traveling on a motorrad is a waste of time and energy.”

Kino glanced at Hermes. “Thank you for your concern. But I’d like to continue traveling.”

The man’s face seemed to stiffen. He pointed a finger at Kino, his tone growing firm. “You didn’t listen to a word of what I said. No respect for your elders, I see. But I guarantee, if you keep wasting your youth like this...” Suddenly, the man looked at his watch. He paled in an instant. “Then you’re going to regret this!” he cried, not even bothering to finish the sentence

properly, and disappeared.

"What a weirdo. What's got him so angry?" Hermes wondered.

"You were awake?" Kino said. "I don't know. Maybe he's got something against travelers and motorrads?" She picked up her tea with one hand and opened up a map with the other. "Anyway, let's go visit the temple in the south once I'm done with this. Someone told me that the view was worth selling your parents for."

"Okay. Lots of stuff to see here, huh."

"Yeah. I wonder if I'll be able to fit it all in three days. I want to look at the huge prehistoric animal bones in the north, and the view from the road on the rocky mountains in this area. Then I want to try the grilled groundfish and check out the outdoor concert in the evening. And—"

The man rushed to the entrance of a shopping district. Waiting for him there was an old woman, a woman about 30 years of age, and two children. They all cast him chilling looks.

"What took you? Parking the car shouldn't take this long!" hissed the woman, who seemed to be his wife.

The man apologized over and over again and bowed his head.

"Tch. I don't know what I was expecting," the woman spat.

That was when a traveler on a motorrad passed by with a roar of the engine. The traveler waved to the man and disappeared.

"Who was that?" asked the woman.

The man quickly explained that the passerby was a traveler he spoke briefly with earlier. His wife's eyes turned to dinner plates.

"A traveler! Honey, are you still dreaming about going off to travel alone?"

The man shook his head in denial.

"You mean it, right?"

He flinched at her frigid gaze. "I mean it. How could I leave my job and my family to travel?"

"I'm glad to hear that," the woman said, turning, but she turned right back around. "Wait! You didn't try riding the motorrad, did you? You promised me you wouldn't! I swear, if you so much as touch a motorrad, we are getting a divorce!"

The man floundered. "Of course not. I sold off my old one, remember? Who'd ride something that dangerous, anyway? I'm a family man. I have people to support."

"Hmph. You had better keep that promise. Without you, our family would be ruined. All I need you to do is work hard and bring home a bigger paycheck. We can barely afford good clothes for the kids on your salary."

The old woman chimed in as well. "She's right, you know. I didn't marry my daughter to you so she could live in poverty. If you can't climb the corporate ladder, the least you could do is work two or three times as hard to make your family happy. It's your responsibility as a member of society, and as a human being."

"Yes, ma'am," the man replied.

The woman handed her things to the man. "Now hurry up! And carry these. You should be making time to serve your family on the weekends, at the very least. Now move!"

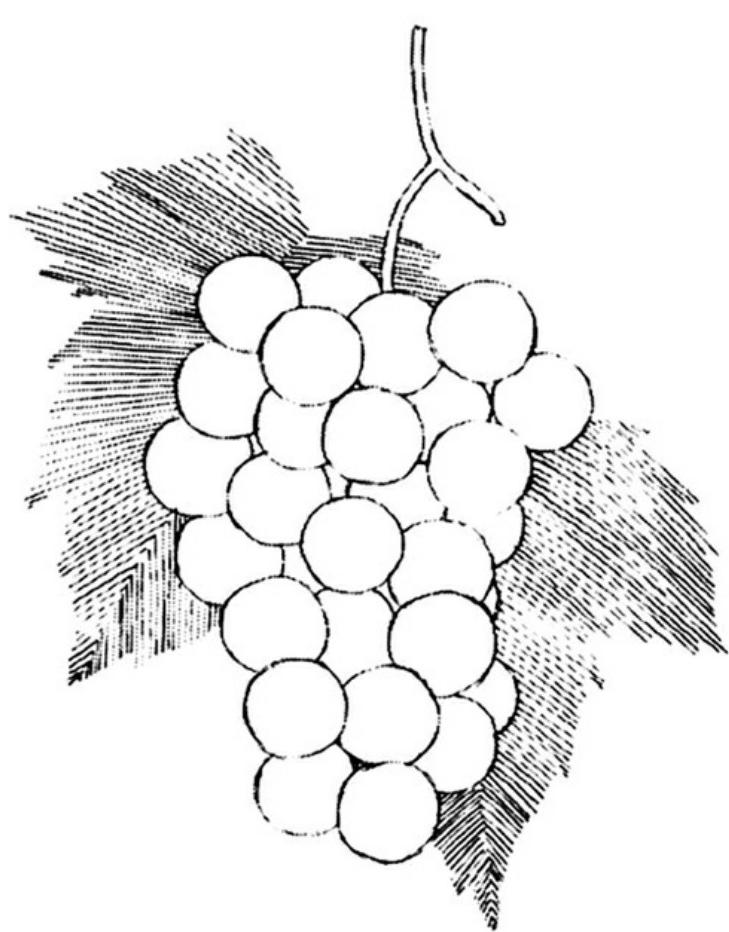
The woman shepherded the children into the shopping district.

"But I'm tired from work, too..." the man whispered.

"Did you say something?" his wife asked without even turning. The man shook his head quickly.

He looked up and turned his gaze to the road. The traveler was long gone, but he watched her depart. The motorrad was long gone, but he listened to the roar of its engine.

And he hurried after his family.



Chapter 8: "The Country of Acknowledgement" -A Vote-

A motorrad was racing across a plain dotted with shrubs.

The motorrad was fully laden with travel gear hanging off the sides of its rear wheel. It roared down the reddish-brown road cracked in the drought.

The rider was in a brown coat with its edges wrapped securely around her thighs. She wore a hat with a brim and a pair of goggles. She was still young, likely in her mid-teens.

The sun was shining brightly. The rider pushed her hat down with her left hand.

"Yeah. I don't need it after all," she said suddenly.

The motorrad replied, "What do you mean, Kino?"

"My coat. I don't need it for riding in this weather. It's kind of hot."

Kino loosened her coat. Underneath, she was wearing a black jacket.

"Do you want to stop so you can take it off?" asked the motorrad.

"I'm okay for now, Hermes. I see the city over there. Look."

Kino pointed into the distance, at a long shadow cast lengthwise near the horizon. The walls of a country.

"I'll put the coat in the back when we leave the country. And I'll switch to a lighter shirt, since it's only going to get warmer."

"What about your winter gear? You don't need it anymore," said Hermes.

Kino nodded. "Yeah. I can't carry it around until next year. I'll have to sell it or trade it in, or throw it out. Too bad. I kind of liked this set." She seemed a little disappointed.

"Nothing you can do about it. Being able to throw out stuff you don't need is a talent too, you know," Hermes said. "Some people just can't do it. Like the ones whose rooms are packed with things they didn't need but couldn't throw

away."

"Like that writer we met in that other country. He just didn't know what to do with the books he'd never read." Kino nodded.

The walls were growing higher in their sights. Soon, Kino and Hermes were at the gates.

Kino went through entry procedures and was referred to an affordable hotel. The sun was already setting by the time she was at the front desk.

Once she had showered and eaten, Kino went down to the lobby and was looking at a map on the wall when someone loudly called to her.

"Traveler! It's good to meet you. Welcome to my hotel!"

Kino turned, surprised. There stood a man in his fifties, dressed too comfortably to be an employee. He declared to the entire lobby, "I am the owner of this hotel. Take a seat! Ask me anything about this country, and I'll tell you everything you need to know."

The owner was quite drunk. The concierge was grimacing visibly.

Thanking the owner, Kino took a seat on the sofa. The owner sat across from her.

Without being prompted, the owner loudly launched into the story of how he founded the establishment, and how he had left the business to his children and was now enjoying a carefree life. And eventually, he went on to say, "You must be here for the festival, Traveler."

Kino, who had been going through the motions of nodding, asked him what the festival was about.

"You didn't know about it? All right, let me explain! First I'll have to tell you about our history."

The country was a kingdom, and the king was mandated to be a doctor.

The kingdom had a good welfare system, which meant that medical services were provided free of charge and all citizens could receive treatment at the royal hospital. Doctors, who worked directly for the king, were held in high esteem.

"This festival, you see, I guess it's actually sort of a voting day. The party's just a bonus—this is a voting festival," said the owner.

"What is the vote for?" asked Kino.

The owner grinned. He lowered his tone. "It's for weeding out people we don't need. And we kill them. That's what you do with useless things, no?"

He explained that the vote had great historic significance and described the origin of the festival.

About 150 years ago, years of poor harvests had driven the country to near-collapse. Starvation and sickness ran rampant through its streets.

That was when the king fell back on his last resort: to kill useless people. He would hold a national vote, where people would write down the names of those they needed. Anyone who did not receive a single vote would be executed. The king went through with his plan, accepting that he was not exempt from the process.

The terrifying day came and went, and not a single person was found to be unnecessary. Everyone was needed, even in this time of hardship.

Moved by his people's resolve, the king reflected on his shameful decision and decided to grit his teeth and fight through the famine with the rest of the country.

The kingdom eventually overcame its struggle, and the incident led to the rapid development of the advanced national welfare system it boasted today.

After the historic first vote, the kingdom made the event an annual one. All literate citizens would write down the names of all the people that they needed in their lives and submit them to the polls.

And so far, said the owner, not a single person had been left out. Everyone in the kingdom needed each other—which was what the festival celebrated.

"I see," said Kino. "So not a single person was actually executed?"

"Precisely! It's unprecedented. We're not crazy enough to actually say to someone, 'No one needs you here, so die'. We do have an execution device, but it's never been used. It's rusted over and displayed in the royal palace. What do

you think, Traveler? Isn't it moving?" the man laughed.

That was when a suit-clad man around thirty years of age walked over. "Er... Father, please don't make a scene."

The owner exploded.

"What did you say, boy?! How dare you interrupt me? I built this hotel from the ground up! You have no right to talk that way!"

"I-I didn't mean—"

"Off! Go do your work! You've got a long way to go before you can relax like me, so don't you dare presume to give me orders. I am a *customer* today! Do you understand me, *Manager*? Well?"

"Y-yes, sir..."

The younger man walked away, dejected. The owner snorted and turned back to Kino. "There'll be plenty to eat and drink at the festival, and great company too. And it's all free of charge, so don't hold yourself back. You can stuff yourself silly with all the food you can eat."

"Thank you," Kino replied. Then she asked about places where she could trade or sell her winter gear.

"Ah, leave that to me. I can speak to a supplier of mine tomorrow and ask for a good price, even if the gear is barely usable. We've been working together for years; he'll listen to me. Come find me at the festival."

The man gave a roar of laughter.

"Thank you," Kino said.

"My pleasure! That's what life is all about, helping people in need. In other words, I am a needed person!" the man declared, oblivious to the frowning people around them.

Kino looked around the lobby. "Speaking of which, am I allowed to participate in the vote?"

"Travelers are not, I'm afraid," the man replied.

It was the morning of Kino's second day in the country.

Kino rose at dawn. As usual, she went over next to the sleeping Hermes and did her exercises, then did drills with her persuaders before maintaining them.

Firecrackers went off outside as Kino ate breakfast. A car was going around, reminding citizens that it was voting day.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Today is the day of the annual vote. Please do not forget your civic duty."

Kino returned to her room after breakfast. She opened her bag and pulled out a thick winter jacket, a pair of winter pants, a winter hat with ear covers, and leather gloves. She folded them all neatly and placed them on the desk.

Staring at the items one by one, Kino whispered, "You were a big help. Thank you. All of you."

"You're welcome," said Hermes.

"Oh. You were awake, Hermes?" Kino turned.

"Nope. Just talking in my sleep."

"Really? I think it's time you woke up."

Hermes groaned. "That's a tall order. You know what they say. 'So short are nights in spring that dawn comes without notice'."

Kino did not say a word.

"What's wrong?"

"You actually got a saying right."

"Well, excuse me."

Kino and Hermes followed the people to the polling station to watch the vote unfold.

At the center of the country was a large building surrounded by trees, and a throng of people crowding inside. The security guard explained that the building was the central hospital, where the king was the director.

Because non-citizens were not permitted to enter, Kino and Hermes watched the crowds from outside the building.

"I'm not putting down your name this year, baby." "Hey, that's my line!"

Couples went hand-in-hand to the hospital, exchanging jokes. Families sat around on the grass after voting to have picnics.

"It's so peaceful," said Hermes.

Firecrackers went off again a little past lunchtime, when Kino was having tea at a restaurant. Someone explained that the noise signaled the end of voting time. Once the votes were tallied and it was found that no one was found to be unneeded this year, the celebrations would begin.

"We'll find out by dinnertime. But we've always had a festival, so no reason to think otherwise this year," someone said.

Kino and Hermes had a look around the country and returned to the hotel late in the afternoon. Stalls were going up on the streets and plaza nearby, and people were busy setting up tables and decorations.

The firecrackers went off for the third time that day as the sun set over the ramparts. The car from earlier went around again, announcing that the festival would indeed take place.

The celebrations started as the shadows began growing long on the ground. Lights sparkled everywhere and the streets were overflowing with energy.

Kino spotted the hotel owner and asked him to sell her winter gear for her. The owner, who was already very drunk, guaranteed a good price for the items and took Kino and Hermes to a nearby store.

The owner barged in through the doors and asked the manager for a quote. The manager gave him a price. The hotel owner would not have it, bringing up years of business relations and demanding a better price. The argument went on for some time, but eventually the manager relented and bought the gear for more than his initial offer.

"My work is done," the owner said proudly, "Now go on and enjoy the festival, Traveler!"

The store manager watched bitterly as the hotel owner left.

"It doesn't look like he has a lot of friends," Kino said.

"I could say the same for you, asking for his help when you can tell that much about him. But I suppose that's why you're a traveler. Don't worry yourself over it."

"Thank you. Could I have four of those shirts there, please?"

The owner nodded and wrapped up the shirts. But his hands paused partway through. "He wasn't always like this. Back in the day, he was a good man. Founded that hotel with his own two hands, and ran it well. But after his wife passed, everyone insisted that he retire. And he's been a career drunkard ever since. It's not just us neighbors. Even his employees and family pretend he doesn't exist. Not a life I'd wish on anybody. It'd be an awful thing, causing trouble for people with everything you do," he sighed.

"I see," Kino replied.

Afterwards, Kino enjoyed the festival, ate as much as her stomach allowed, and bought the things she needed at low prices.

She returned to the hotel to find the drunk owner making a scene.

The next day. It was the morning of Kino's third day in the country.

Kino rose at dawn. As usual, she went over next to the sleeping Hermes and did her exercises, then did drills with her persuaders before maintaining them.

That was when she noticed a small commotion outside. Through the window, she spotted a car stopping outside the hotel and several men in police uniform entering the building.

Kino went down to the lobby to find the owner's son and family in pajamas, and the hotel employees, all listening to the police. She asked one of the bellboys what had happened.

"The owner passed away," he said.

"How?" Kino asked.

The owner had not returned home the previous night, but because it was a festival day, no one had been worried. That was when the police came to explain that the owner had been found crumpled in an alley overnight, and had died in the hospital. The cause of death was cardiac arrest.

"I always told him to ease up on the drinks..." The owner's son sighed weakly.

Kino watched the son and the family follow the police out the doors. She asked the bellboy if the funeral would be held that day.

"No. I'm afraid we don't hold funerals in our country. The dead are cremated and buried in a cemetery outside the walls as soon as the family has said their goodbyes. Death is the end; there's nothing to be done after it."

That afternoon, Kino packed her things, refueled Hermes, and left the country. She was in her jacket, and wearing a thick belt around her waist. Cannon was holstered on her right thigh.

She rolled up her coat and tied it to Hermes' luggage rack.

Just outside the western gates was what seemed to be a park. Kino saw large, well-kept trees, gazebos with benches, and rows upon rows of large headstones.

Several people were gathered in a corner. They eventually finished their business and walked in Kino and Hermes' direction.

"Hello, Traveler," said one of the people. The son of the late hotel owner. "We're finished now. It's that headstone over there. If you have some time before you leave, I'd appreciate it if you'd..."

"Of course."

"We'll be heading back now. Safe travels."

Kino watched the group disappear inside the gates and pushed Hermes to the headstone.

The only ones still there were a young man in a white doctor's coat, and several employees cleaning up the grave.

"If you'll excuse us, Doctor," said the employees, taking their equipment and following the family into the gates.

The young man was filling out a document when Kino approached. He looked up in surprise.

He explained to Kino that he was a doctor, and that he was filling out a form

to confirm the burial of the deceased.

"I see," Kino said. She took off her hat and closed her eyes, whispering a silent prayer. Then she told the doctor that she had stayed at the deceased's hotel.

"Of course," the doctor said with a nod. His hand stopped. "If you are a traveler, I assume you will be leaving this country now. Then could you give me some of your time? I would like to tell you something."

"I suppose so, but..."

"What do you want to tell us? Is it something fun?" Hermes asked.

The doctor replied, "Hm. I can't guarantee that. But it will be interesting, if nothing else. I want to tell you about the wonderful system we have in our country."

The doctor finished filling out the form and closed his file. Then he led Kino and Hermes to a nearby gazebo. He gestured for Kino to sit and made to sit down himself, but stopped for fear of getting his coat dirty. Kino sat on Hermes.

"So what is this system about?" Hermes asked.

The doctor smiled and said nonchalantly, "I'm the one who killed the deceased."

Unfazed, Kino asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said. I killed the hotel owner myself. When he was brought into the central hospital early this morning, he was simply suffering a case of acute alcohol poisoning. A little out of sorts, but conscious. But after the treatment, he was found to have been an Anonymer. So I killed him via lethal injection. It was nerve-racking, to be honest. I'd never performed the procedure on my own before."

"Wait, what's an Anonymer?" asked Hermes.

"Ah, pardon me. It's a medical term in our country that refers to people who have not received a single vote in the polls. A person whose continued existence has not been acknowledged. Do you know about the history of the vote?"

Kino nodded. "But I was told that not a single person has been executed so

far."

A mischievous grin rose to the doctor's face. "That is a lie."

"Then people have died?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes. Quite a few people have been declared Anonymer since the days of the great famine. Mostly young children or elders who were not useful to anyone. The king at the time was a decisive man, but even he was hesitant about publicly executing citizens in that way. The system would create fear in the country, and that would not be good for the needed people—the people who had the right to live happy lives. So he came up with a way to get rid of the unnecessary elements in secret."

"How?" asked Hermes.

"Simple. —Did you know that the king is a doctor, and has authority over all doctors in this country as the director of the central hospital?" the doctor said proudly.

Kino nodded.

"You see, we doctors take care of these elements quietly in the hospital. When the votes are counted and Anonymer identified, they are put on a list. And we kill them discreetly when they come to the hospital. All this, before the next voting day."

"I see." "Hm."

"Those who come in with serious illnesses will simply die if we leave them alone. As for others, we give them injections or drips claiming that their condition has seriously worsened. Traffic accidents are the easiest by far to use as a cover. It's very easy to claim that the patient died of brain hemorrhaging. Alcohol poisoning is also another easy one," the doctor said, "But occasionally, we get the rare Anonymer who does not become injured or ill. In that case, we dispose of them by claiming to have found an illness during their regular checkup. Annual checkups are mandated by law for all citizens, you see."

Kino asked, "And you do this every year?"

"That's right. It's practically tradition now. On average, we dispose of a dozen

people a year.”

“And no one has found out about it?”

“There has been some suspicion, yes. But everyone knows that accidents are bound to happen, and no one really mourns an Anonymer. They were already voted unnecessary. Not even family members make a fuss about unusual circumstances—in fact, they’re more happy to be rid of a nuisance. By the next day—or after the burial—they feel relief. There’s the insurance payout to look forward to, and the burial costs are covered by the government. No loss for anyone. And in the case of a traffic accident, the perpetrator is often given a very lenient sentence for their cooperation in disposing of an Anonymer.”

“I see.”

The doctor browsed through his file. “Let me see... Ah, yes. This one’s been an Anonymer since the festival before the last. He must have been very unloved. It really is a coincidence that he happened to be the first to go this round. I happened to be on duty at the time and performed the procedure myself. It was very easy.”

The doctor closed the file. He exhaled.

“But I have to admit, it was a little unnerving. I was afraid he might suddenly sit up in his bed. I’m glad it’s over and done with now. I’ve written up the death certificate, and the man is buried. I feel I’ve grown as a doctor now. It’s a momentous occasion for me, which is why I wanted to tell you all this,” he said, embarrassed.

“Do only doctors know about this? Or do the nurses know too?” Kino asked.

“Nurses too, yes. But no one else,” the doctor replied. “To become a doctor, you have to graduate from medical or nursing school at the royal university and pass a national exam. Those who pass are granted an audience with the king, who personally explains the system. Oh, but only doctors are permitted to perform the procedure.”

“How did you feel when you first learned the truth?”

“I was... I was moved. Of course, it was surprising and I did feel a little betrayed. But my nose stung when I heard the king explain, ‘Whether as an

individual or a country, it is necessary to protect what is necessary and throw away things that are not. With your talent and ability, you will serve the country by removing elements that are unnecessary to our country'. I was holding back tears that day," the doctor said, his eyes watering. He met Kino's gaze.

"Personally, I believe that humans are meant to live in connection with other humans. Which is why people who do not have any such connections must not exist. They deserve to be removed. It is a very rational thing to do—almost like trimming away the country's excesses. I believe this is the ultimate welfare system. And the only people who can make it all possible are people like us, who work in the medical field. That is why I am very proud of the work I do."

Kino listened in silence.

"Has anyone ever failed, though?" asked Hermes.

"Failure is not an option!" the doctor declared. "Doctors and nurses are not permitted to make mistakes! I swear on my honor that we will not fail in our duties. Certainly, people can end up in circumstances that lead to making mistakes. But at the same time, people have the ability to prevent such mistakes from occurring. Those who cannot utilize the wisdom and experiences of others to prevent mistakes from occurring should turn in their medical licenses," he said firmly. "I want to gain more experience in both treatment and disposal. My dream is to save everyone who is necessary and must be saved, and to dispose of everyone who is unnecessary and must be removed."

"Uh-huh. That was a pretty interesting story," Hermes said.

The doctor suddenly looked very self-conscious. "Thank you for listening to me. I feel so much better now that I've told someone. I can't exactly go around discussing these things in the country, after all. Traveler, please come by if you ever feel unwell. I will take full responsibility for your care. Our services are provided free of charge, no matter the difficulty of the procedure or the length of hospitalization. I guarantee the best treatment our country has to offer."

With a wave, the doctor left. He disappeared through the gates.

Kino pushed Hermes out of the cemetery and started the engine. She took one last look at the headstones before departing.

For some time, she said nothing. The motorrad soon drove onto a long road

on the plain dotted with shrubs.

Hermes finally broke the silence.

“Can I guess what you’re thinking now, Kino?”

“Hm? Sure,” Kino replied. “I’ll call you cool if you can guess.”

“Okay. So you must have looked back on everything so far and thought like this,” Hermes paused for dramatic effect. “Oh. If only I’d known it was all free of charge, I’d have gotten a slight injury beforehand and gone to the hospital for a full checkup. I don’t like needles, though’.”

Kino said nothing. Hermes continued down the road, his engine rumbling rhythmically.

“Hermes...”

“Yeah?”

Kino admitted wryly, “Word-for-word.”

“I knew it!” Hermes cheered. “Oh! Wait a sec!”

“What’s wrong?” Kino asked.

“You sold the gloves, right?”

Kino nodded. “Yeah.”

“Didn’t you say you didn’t want to damage your regular gloves, so you were going to keep using these until they wore out? For picking up firewood and stuff.”

Kino slammed the brakes. Hermes screeched to a halt.

When Kino looked back, she saw the horizon. Not even a shadow of the country’s walls were visible.

“Yeah...”

As Kino stared in disappointment, Hermes said nonchalantly, “Too bad. It’s not like you to make a mistake like that.”

Kino shook her head.

“Well? Wanna go back?”

"We can't." Kino said.

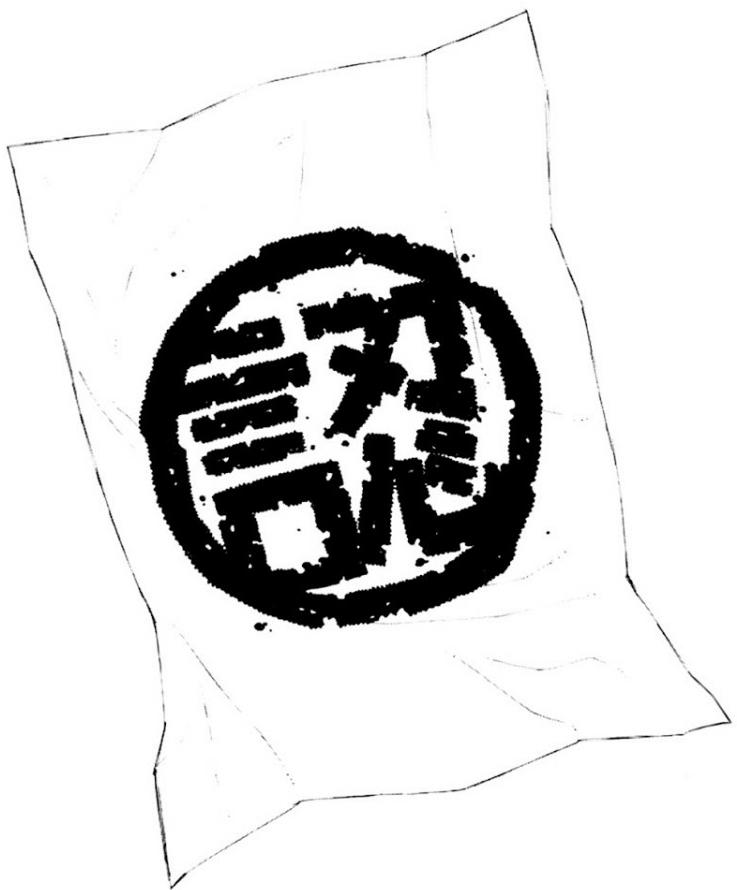
"What about the gloves?"

Kino turned. She was looking ahead again. "I'll find another pair someplace else."

"Right."

"Let's go."

Kino started Hermes again. His rear wheel spun, kicking up dust in its wake. The motorrad soon disappeared from sight.





Chapter 9:" The Story of the Pillagers" -Bloodsuckers-

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, soft, white fur. I look as though I am always smiling, but that doesn't mean I'm always happy. I was simply born with this face.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater, and he is traveling on a buggy after having lost his home in complex circumstances.

And I am with Master Shizu.

One day, we arrived at a small country in the highlands surrounded by trees.

The locals farmed rice paddies of the gentle slopes, and were hard at work. On the flat plains at the base of the valley was a village with a river running through the middle.

The country had two sets of walls—high ramparts protecting the village, and low stone walls around the larger perimeter.

"It's beautiful here. And peaceful too," Master Shizu said from the driver's seat. He sounded happy. As usual, he was wearing his green sweater.

"It's a small country, Master Shizu. Almost small enough to be a village," I remarked.

Master Shizu replied, "Yeah. But bigger isn't necessarily better. The important thing is for the people to have happy, fulfilling lives." His eyes narrowed sadly. "Although there's no set definition of happiness, I suppose. And no one can really say what will make us happy."

I could not respond.

"Let's go," Master Shizu said, noticing my gaze, and accelerated.

We descended a slope and neared the paddies, to the surprise of the farmers. Master Shizu disembarked and called out to them. They rushed into the walls. Soon, several men came out of the gates.

Master Shizu explained that we were travelers, and asked to be allowed entry

and rest. The men asked him if he was armed.

Master Shizu showed them his favorite sword, which sat next to the driver's seat. When they asked if he had anything else, he shook his head.

The men told us that the country could not provide him full hospitality, and asked if that was all right. Master Shizu nodded, and they finally gave us permission to enter.

The men asked Master Shizu to hide his buggy in the large storehouse by the gates. They would explain why later, they said.

Master Shizu did as he was told and took out his large, black bag. He put his sword inside, and followed a guide into the village.

The village was packed with two-story houses. The roads snaked and twisted like a labyrinth. Master Shizu seemed to be enjoying the sights. He looked around, commenting that the streets were very old and fascinating to see.

"Perfect for hide-and-seek," he said at one of the more confusing stretches of the road, which twisted in strange directions every other step. The guide gave him a quizzical glance.

Eventually, Master Shizu and I were led into some sort of assembly hall.

Waiting there were a group of men, who were the leaders of the country. Several women were serving tea. Master Shizu took a seat, and they greeted him.

The men were very grave indeed.

"You're a traveler, you say. ...As much as we'd like to give you our warmest welcome, I'm afraid you've come at an unfortunate time," one of them said. The other men looked equally as despondent.

"May I ask what the problem is?" said Master Shizu.

The men exchanged glances. One of them said, "We are being pillaged."

According to the men, the country had always been undisturbed. The people lived in peace.

The country was too small to have a military or police force. Occasional

disputes with other lands were solved by the young men.

But several years ago, a group of men arrived on horseback. Ravenous, they butchered and ate livestock without permission.

Naturally, the villagers complained. But the men were shameless. They called themselves bandits and killed the men who went to try and stop them.

The villagers trembled in fear as the men demanded monthly offerings. If the villagers refused to comply, the bandits would slaughter them all.

"We considered taking shelter in the inner walls, yes. But if they were to simply camp out at the gates, we could not harvest our crops. They could even poison the river, too. The village agreed that it would cause less trouble if we simply gave them food, as they demanded. It was a painful decision, but one we all came to together," said one of the men.

"I see," Master Shizu said quietly.

Afterwards, the bandits would come once a month to take the village's offerings.

The village's once-abundant food supplies were being siphoned away. One bad harvest, and the villagers would likely starve. So everyone had to work harder than before every day.

"People are beginning to lose their minds. It's been very stressful for us," said one of the men.

"I understand. Thank you for sharing such a painful story with us," Master Shizu said, and fell into thought. Then he asked, "When are they due to arrive next?"

"Tomorrow. We have the offering ready. How much longer will they extort us this way...?"

"How many of them are there?"

"Always about twenty. But they are all strong, grown men, all on horseback and armed with persuaders. They are bloodthirsty killers. You should take care on your travels too. They might try to take your vehicle and murder you."

"Of course," Master Shizu muttered.

"Traveler. We would be most grateful if you could pass on our plight to any nearby countries that you may visit. We...we understand that no country would be mad enough to send men to help a tiny country like ours. It wouldn't help them in the least. We know that we must solve our own problems. But it is simply impossible for us. All we can do is be thankful that the brigands are only demanding food," one of the men said sadly, The others nodded, also desperate.

Master Shizu fell into thought once more.

Then he said that he had a question.

What did he want to know, asked the men. All eyes were on Master Shizu.

"May I have a look around the village? The streets are beautiful."

A young man guided Master Shizu and myself around the town. Master Shizu took in the sights, even more fascinated than before. He examined each and every street, checking how they crisscrossed in complicated ways and occasionally doubling back around.

The women and children gave him curious looks. As for me—

"Wow, a big white doggy!"

I was almost chased around by the local children.

People were stacking crates in the plaza by the gates. The guide said, "Those are the provisions we're handing over tomorrow."

"It's not a small amount," Master Shizu said. "What do the people do when the bandits come to take the food?"

"Hide in basement storehouses. Don't want anyone to get hurt, after all. No one comes outside. And this hasn't happened so far, but what if they start dragging away the women and children? Just thinking about it gives me nightmares," the guide replied, shaking his head.

"I see," Master Shizu said.

That night.

Master Shizu and I were given a room in the assembly hall. It was furnished

with nothing but a bed, but Master Shizu thanked them just as profusely as he had when they served him a humble dinner.

"Will you be repaying them for their hospitality?" I asked. Master Shizu had begun polishing his sword by lamplight.

"No. It's nothing that spectacular," he replied. "There are people in need here, and I can help them. I don't need a reason to help people. Helping them with a reward in mind isn't the best thing for them, either."

"Of course. Then how, Master Shizu?"

"Persuasion," he replied tersely.

"I don't believe the villagers will welcome your decision. They'll worry that your attempt will only provoke the men into massacring the people."

"You're right. Which is why tomorrow I'll be a traveler acting for his own reasons. And besides, I'm not completely decided yet."

"What do you mean?"

"If I can't persuade them, I'll have to turn tail and run as fast as I can," Master Shizu joked. He added, "Which is why I can't blame this country or the people. Some people just aren't cut out for certain things."

"Do you like this country?" I asked.

Master Shizu put on a slight smile. "I don't know."

The next day.

The villagers bolted their doors and windows at the crack of dawn. The weather was beautiful, but not a soul was on the streets.

We were told to take shelter as well, but Master Shizu declined. We waited in our room.

Master Shizu wore a waterproof parka with a hole in the left side, and put his goggles around his neck.

Each goggle lens was protected by a film with a roll case. If the goggles happened to get dirty, Master Shizu would pull the strings on the cases to roll up the film and clear up his vision in an instant.

Master Shizu looked out at the plaza, holding his favorite sword.

Left for the bandits were crates of food and a live mountain goat. The gates were open.

I did as Master Shizu instructed and curled up at his feet, waiting.

I heard hooves approaching around noon. They were headed in our direction.

"They're here," said Master Shizu. I rose as well.

Men on horseback came trotting through the gates. They ranged in age from their twenties to their fifties. All were in messy but comfortable clothing, and armed with rifle-type persuaders.

Without a care in the world, they came inside and reached the plaza. Then they disembarked. Soon the tiny plaza was packed with men and horses.

The men roared in triumph when they spotted the food. They began to secure the crates.

"Twenty-two," said Master Shizu.

"Yes. And all grown men."

"I expected as much. Most of their persuaders are rifles. Perfect."

"Will you be going?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Master Shizu put on his goggles and stuck his sword in his belt.

I watched him walk towards the plaza from behind a building.

The bandits were bewildered when they spotted Master Shizu, who made for a comical sight in his parka and goggles, armed with his sword. Several of them loaded their persuaders.

"Hello," Master Shizu said casually as he approached the men. A bearded, middle-aged man who had not been helping the others secure the crates waved to the others. Everyone but the one person whose rifle was trained on Master Shizu went back to work.

"You're not from here. Are you, boy?" said the bearded man. Master Shizu

stopped a short distance from the bandits.

"That's right. I'm a traveler. I arrived here just yesterday."

"I don't know if you're aware, but we're doing this with the villagers' consent. So I don't want to see your ridiculous goggles and sword get in our way."

"You won't," Master Shizu said. He then added, "But could I ask you to stop what you are doing? You are making the villagers' lives difficult. That is why I came to speak to you."

"Oh? Did they ask you to do this?" asked the bearded man.

"No. They did not."

The bearded man stared in disbelief. "Boy. You are not going to survive long in this world, that's all I can say."

"Really?"

"Only a fool picks a fight he can't win," the bearded man advised and threatened at the same time. "And people tend to die when they fight losing battles. I'm speaking from experience, boy."

"You're right. Could I ask for an answer now?" Master Shizu said, taking a discreet half-step forward.

"What?"

"I asked you if you could stop this."

Another half-step.

The bearded man guffawed and pointed at Master Shizu. An order to shoot.

The man next to him opened fire, aiming for Master Shizu's heart. Master Shizu pulled his scabbard with his left hand and drew with his right. The blade deflected the round.

Master Shizu leapt forward two paces and tackled the man who had shot at him, and pushed his sword into his heart. Then he pushed away the body with his left hand, pulled out his sword, and severed the bearded man's neck, then cut down the man who was standing behind him. The bearded man's head landed on the ground. It all took less than four seconds.

Blood splattered next to Master Shizu, but his parka protected him from the spray. Three bodies collapsed.

Several of the bandits stared, frozen in confusion. They did not understand what was happening.

“Y-y-y-you...” one stammered. “You bastard!”

The words he finally managed turned out to be his last. Master Shizu’s blade slit his belly.

In the blink of an eye, Master Shizu charged at the men securing the crates. He cut them down one after another, almost as if to a rhythm.

One man went down, and the next found a sword in his neck. The third man collapsed with a horizontal cut across his gut. The fourth man lost his head and arm. His crate fell and hit his shoulder.

Not stopping for a moment, Master Shizu swiveled around and cut the fifth man in half.

By the time the fifth man’s upper body hit the ground, Master Shizu had crossed the plaza and taken cover beside a building.

One of the quicker bandits opened fire, but he was too late. Master Shizu was safely hidden.

Eight bodies—or bodies-to-be—littered the plaza. The remaining bandits howled madly.

“Damn it!” “Kill him!” “After him!” “Bastard!” “Shoot him down!”

I left cover and went around the plaza to follow Master Shizu. I spotted him hiding in a narrow alley.

He shooed me away when I tried to approach. I stayed back.

The barrel of a long persuader was poking out form behind an alley corner. Master Shizu grabbed it and pulled, then stabbed the neck of the man who was dragged out with it. The man pulled the trigger, but the bullet flew off in a wildly different direction and hit a wall.

“Did you get him?” asked another bandit from across the way.

"Yeah," Master Shizu replied. He pushed the body into the alley and swiftly followed around the corner. He was out of my line of sight.

"Ah!" "Ugh!"

I heard two voices. Master Shizu came back around the corner, shaking blood off his sword. I went to his side. "That makes three more, then. Am I halfway there?" he asked.

I nodded.

Master Shizu took off silently down the alley. I followed.

He stopped at an intersection between two wider alleys. I could hear the bandits from the plaza saying, "Someone opened fire!" "Did he get him?"

I ducked and peered in the direction of the plaza. Three men were coming, persuaders at the ready.

I told Master Shizu how many of them were approaching. He waited a moment, considered the timing, and gently stepped on my hind leg.

I leapt out from behind the corner.

"Whoa!" one of the men cried, taking aim.

I rushed across the alley and disappeared into another.

"Damn it. Just a mutt." "Hey, focus!"

The men drew closer. Master Shizu bolted forward. The man in the lead went down, blood gushing from his neck before he could scream. The second man took an elbow to the jaw as Master Shizu thrusted, leaving a gaping wound in his side.

"Damn you!"

The third man took aim with a hand persuader. Master Shizu pushed one of the near-corpse forward.

The third man pulled the trigger, but he was too close. Master Shizu left his line of sight with a simple step and swung. A pair of hands fell to the ground, still gripping the hand persuader.

"Huh?"

The third man looked at his hands. Blood was spewing in time with his heartbeat. Master Shizu grabbed his collar with his left hand and dragged him into the alley I was in.

“Huh? What?”

The man swung his arms helplessly. That was when I spotted a figure between their legs, taking aim at Master Shizu.

BANG.

A bullet cut through the air and smashed open a human head. The man Master Shizu had dragged in lost half his skull. Master Shizu dropped his human shield and joined me in the alley. Several bullets drove themselves in a nearby wall.

“Eight more.”

Master Shizu leapt into another alley and pulled on the roller case strings to clear the blood from his goggles. He also wiped the brain fluid from his cheek.

Master Shizu and I made our way to a confusing stretch of the road, which twisted in strange directions every other step. He shook blood off his parka and doubled back around the same area several times.

Then he leaned against a house on the corner and waited in silence.

Soon, I heard two voices.

“Let’s get outta here. He even got the boss.”

“We’re not letting him get away with this. I swear, I am going to slaughter the bastard!”

“But—”

“Shut your hole!”

Master Shizu stood quietly, waiting. Their footsteps drew near.

The men followed the bloodstains to a three-way fork, taking the opposite route. Master Shizu leapt out, chucked their heading, and gave chase.

He caught up to them two corners later. Master Shizu was so close that he almost looked like he was part of their group.

Master Shizu covered the mouth of one of the men and stabbed him in the side.

Pushing away the man who died silently, he grabbed the other man and killed him in the same way.

“Six left.”

Master Shizu left the alley—which was perfect for hide-and-seek—and quickly made his way for the street, never for a moment letting his guard down.

I almost ran into him when he stopped.

“Damn it. Another dead end.” “This way!”

Anxious voices followed several rushed footsteps.

Master Shizu followed the source of the voices. Two men were running for the plaza. Master Shizu intentionally caught up to them and raised his voice.
“Will you stop this now?”

“D-damn you!”

The two bandits turned in shock. One opened fire, his first shot missing by a mile and his second shot easily dodged by Master Shizu.

He gestured for me to stay where I was, and disappeared into another alley.

The man with the persuader was getting closer. His companion grabbed his shoulder. “Leave him!”

“Are you serious?!”

“He’s got the upper hand here! We have to lure him out!”

A reasonable response. Master Shizu knew the complicated alleys by heart and could kill without a sound. The bandits, on the other hand, had long, unwieldy persuaders whose noises could not be hidden.

That was when Master Shizu leapt out of a corner and beheaded the cleverer of the two men.

The other man stared in horror and was stabbed through the heart.

“Four more.”

"None left in this area, Master Shizu," I said, following after him.

"It'll be trouble if we let any of them get away."

Master Shizu sprinted towards the gates. Then he took cover behind the house nearest to the gates and scanned the plaza.

Four men stood there, along with their horses and multiple bodies. Three of the men were forcing supplies onto their horses, even trying to drag away the struggling mountain goat.

"Cowards! Running off on your own?!" one of them cried.

"Shut up!"

The first man tried to drag one of his companions off his horse, but took two revolver shots to the chest.

"Three left," said Master Shizu.

A second later, another man rode for the gates.

Master Shizu guessed that he would pass in front of him and took several steps back. Then he ran towards the house.

"Hey!"

Master Shizu jumped onto the wall and held out his sword. The blade grazed the horse's ears and beheaded the rider.

The headless rider continued for some time until the horse stopped. Then he fell to the ground.

Master Shizu landed. "Two left," he said, slowly walking into the open.

The remaining bandits were just about to climb onto their horses, having fully loaded them. They froze when they noticed their headless companion and the undaunted Master Shizu.

"D-die!" cried the one who killed his own companion, taking aim. Master Shizu kept his gaze trained on him. The man pulled the trigger.

The first two rounds missed. The third stopped at Master Shizu's shoulder and the fourth at his side, both deflected against his blade.

Master Shizu walked without so much as blinking. The men pulled the trigger again and again, terrified.

Soon, the persuaders were reduced to clicking.

“Agh!”

The man ejected the empty magazine and reached for a spare on his belt.

But his trembling fingers could not load the magazine. His hands and teeth were chattering.

Master Shizu drew closer and closer.

“No! Get back!”

The man dropped his magazine; bullets scattered across the plaza.

“AAAAAAARGH!”

The man finally threw the revolver. It flew through the air and landed on the ground. Master Shizu was already out of his sight.

The man’s eyes were comically wide. For a split second, they met mine. The man behind him, who had been standing frozen, fell to the ground with blood gushing out of his neck.

“Hey.”

“Agh!”

Master Shizu had his sword on the back of the survivor’s neck. “Are there any more of you out there?” he asked.

The man stood stiff and replied, “N-n-n-n-no! There aren’t!”

“Will any groups or countries be looking for you if you were to disappear?”

“No!”

“You’re not trained soldiers. Why did you pillage this country?”

“B-because it was so easy. I used to be a farmer. But it was backbreaking work... And I was exiled, too...”

“Which is why you started taking advantage of this little village?”

"Y-yes. Put yourself in my shoes! It's hard making a living!"

"You're right. It is hard to survive out there."

The man turned, glad that Master Shizu agreed. An awkward smile rose to his face. "R-right?"

Master Shizu smiled. "You won't have to worry anymore."

"What?"

The awkward smile hit the ground.

Master Shizu calmed down the panicking horses and tied them to a nearby post. Then he took off his goggles and wiped his face. He even took off the parka and wrapped it up, putting it down with the goggles in a clean section of the plaza.

"Master Shizu," I said.

"Hmm?"

"Excellent work, Master."

"Oh, Riku," Master Shizu said with a bitter chuckle. "I don't think being good at murder is something to be praised for."

It was quite some time later that the villagers crept out of their homes.

Master Shizu had cleaned his sword, sheathed it, and was waiting calmly in the plaza.

People began screaming when they found the corpses in the streets.

Soon, they villagers swarmed the plaza. Everyone stayed on the outskirts because the plaza itself was piled with bodies and stained a deep red. There were no children outside.

The people kept their distance, staring at Master Shizu in shock.

"Did you do all this, Traveler? With one sword?" asked a man.

Master Shizu stood. "Yes."

"Y-you killed all of them?" asked another man. He seemed neither happy nor sad.

"Yes, all twenty-two of them," Master Shizu replied. "They have no allies. You will not need to leave offerings for anyone now. You can go back to living in peace."

Relief flooded the plaza.

But it was soon replaced by another emotion. People looked at Master Shizu differently now. The men were whispering amongst themselves.

Master Shizu closed his eyes. He had been half-expecting this response.

"This is too gruesome," said one man.

Another agreed. "Yes. It's too much. You went too far."

"You didn't have to kill, much less slaughter them all! Don't you think so, everyone?"

The other villagers nodded, growing angry. Their icy gazes were all on Master Shizu.

One of the men stepped forward. "Traveler, do you realize what you've done? You've committed murder!"

Master Shizu listened without a word.

"We...our country does not permit inflicting harm on anyone, no matter the reason. And as for murder, it is a grave crime indeed. It is unacceptable. Don't you agree, everyone?"

The villagers voiced their agreement, growing more restless.

"We are different from you, Traveler," said the man, "We cannot condone any act of violence. We never asked you to kill these people."

"Indeed you didn't. I was acting independently," Master Shizu said to the people glaring at him.

The man continued. "We cannot permit you to stay here any longer, Traveler. I speak for all of us when I say you must leave our country at once."

Master Shizu nodded. "I understand. Please bring me my bag. I left it at the assembly hall."

Soon, someone came back with Master Shizu's things. Master Shizu thanked

him and slung his parka and goggles over the bag. Then he hefted the bag, still swearing his sword on his belt. “I apologize, but I’ll have to ask you to clean up the bodies yourselves. The persuaders and horses are intact and unharmed, all completely usable. They are all yours.”

No one responded.

“Thank you for letting us stay the night. If you’ll excuse us.”

Master Shizu bowed at the glaring villagers.

“Let’s go, Riku.”

He began to walk away, towards the open gates.

I followed.

Master Shizu’s buggy was driving through the woods, slower than usual. Sunlight filtered in through the leaves.

When I turned, I could not see the country in the valley.

“Are you disappointed, Master Shizu?”

He shook his head. Master Shizu did not look any different from usual.

“It’s their country. And their choice to make, which I have to respect,” he said, and added, “I’m not needed there anymore, and that’s reason enough.”

“It almost feels as if they took advantage of you,” I said. But Master Shizu shook his head.

“Yeah. They’re strong people.”

I asked, “Did you like this country?”

Master Shizu put on a slight smile.

“I don’t know.”



*



Chapter 10: "The Bridge Country" -Their Line-

A lone motorrad was crossing the desert.

The motorrad's luggage rack was laden with travel gear that threatened to spill over the sides of its rear wheel. It traveled northward, leaving behind tire tracks on the hard, sandy beach.

To the left of the motorrad was a clear sea that seemed to go on forever. To its right was a vast desert littered with dunes. All around was nothing but sand and water.

The motorrad's rider was wearing a black jacket and a thick belt. On her right thigh was a holstered hand persuader—a large-caliber revolver.

The rider wore a hat with ear flaps and silver-rimmed goggles. She was in her mid-teens, or perhaps a little older.

Suddenly, the rider tapped on the motorrad's tank and pointed at the distance.

A white line seemed to hover over the sea, like a haze. As they drew near, they spotted countless pillars supporting the line. It was a bridge.

Piers stood at regular intervals in the sea, supporting the arches that made up the bridge. It was wide enough for two cars to pass by with ease, and about a person's jumping height from the surface of the water.

The bridge started in the middle of the desert and went due west. It disappeared into the horizon.

The motorrad arrived at the bridge. The rider disembarked and looked up.

She had been looking for the bridge. Smiling, she explained that this bridge would lead them to the next continent without incurring them a fee.

The motorrad was suspicious. Why was there a magnificent bridge out here, in the middle of nowhere? And where had the countless white stones that composed it come from?

The rider replied that none of the travelers who told her about the bridge

knew the answer. And she added that the important thing was that the bridge existed. The motorrad agreed.

When the motorrad asked if they would be able to cross within the day, the rider admitted that it would be difficult to cover the distance. They would camp on the bridge overnight.

The rider straddled the motorrad again and began the crossing.

Small stones paved the bridge's surface, each filed to perfection. The motorrad moved smoothly down the length of the structure. The sculpted stone railings lining the bridge were works of art.

Soon, the rider and the motorrad found themselves in the middle of the sea. The white bridge cut across the shining blue waters. The bridge continued into the horizon.

The motorrad continued to roar westward.

The sun eventually began to set. When it began to cast a golden glow on the bridge and the ocean, the rider stopped the motorrad.

At night, the sea was dark and still. Innumerable stars dotted the sky. The rider complained about the stars making it too bright to sleep, putting a blanket on the bridge to sleep on.

The next day, the rider rose at dawn. The sky was a faint purple.

The rider did light exercises and trained with the persuader she kept strapped on her right thigh. Then she ate portable rations for breakfast, got water from the can tied to the top of her bag, then fueled the motorrad.

When the sun rose, the cloudless sky and the calm sea turned blue. The rider smacked the motorrad awake and resumed her westward journey.

Around noon, the motorrad suddenly told the rider to stop.

The rider hit the brakes. The motorrad stopped in the middle of the sea crossing.

The motorrad had found something. The rider turned and went back a short distance. The motorrad told the rider to look at the railings. They did not look any different from the rest. The rider was wondered what the motorrad was

talking about.

The motorrad explained that words were carved into the railings. The rider disembarked and examined the railings. She took off her gloves and ran her fingers over them.

She could tell that something had been carved there, but much of it had been eroded away. The motorrad volunteered to read it for her. He explained that the words—the sentences—continued down the railings.

The rider thought for a moment. She said that she did not want to waste her time, so she would listen to the first part before deciding whether to hear the rest.

The motorrad agreed and read the beginning.

'We must accomplish our mission—the mission to build a bridge in this place. On these railings, I now leave behind a record of what we did and why. It will serve as our testament to those who will one day cross this bridge.'

Immediately, the rider shut off the motorrad's engine. There was a moment of complete and utter silence.

The rider pushed the motorrad to the next set of railings. She asked him to read the rest of the story.

'We lived on the coast on the east side of this bridge. We had walls and a country to call our own. For a very long time, none of us had any clue why we were living in a desolate desert. But no one was concerned. We ate fish every day and lived happy lives full of singing and dancing.'

'Near our country were gargantuan structures we call "pyramids". They were built with white stone blocks stacked neatly on top of one another. We did not know when these structures were built, or why. But we found the pyramids very useful. We used the stone blocks to build houses and pave roads and repair the ramparts.'

'One day, one of our countrymen found something at the bottom of the sea. We dragged it up together and found that it was some sort of a safe. When we pried it open, we found countless documents inside. It was a disappointment, as we had been hoping for valuables.'

'But when we had a close look at the documents, we found something even more valuable than any treasure. We learned why we were here. We learned of our purpose. Of what we have been doing. And of what we must do.

'One of the documents was a plan for a bridge. It was a beautiful stone arch bridge that would connect our land to the continent beyond the horizon. The plan was massive in scale, involving the construction of countless piers in the sea. It also came with the many blueprints we would need to build the structure.

'Another document detailed two important facts: the first was that the materials for the bridge would be piled on the beach by the build site, and the second was that imprisoned criminals would be moved to the construction site to provide manual labor. Once the bridge was completed, the convicts would be released and permitted to return to the motherland.

'We were here for a mission. We had to build a bridge. But we had ignored this calling and wasted our days eating fish, singing, and dancing. We were here for one purpose: to build the bridge detailed in the plans. The country was in agreement. We had detailed blueprints. We had the materials. We had more manpower than our forebears. We were both willing and able.

'If someone came for us after we finished the bridge, each individual would be free to decide whether to remain here or to go back to the motherland. We set out with hope in our hearts.

'Construction was slow but steady. We followed the blueprints to the letter and made the pillars out of stones that could float and be sunk. Those stones, we retrieved from inside the pyramids. We floated the stones into the open sea, moved them to their places, and drilled holes into them to sink them. When we poured sand into the completed foundations, we found ourselves with strong, sturdy piers to sustain the bridge. We rejoiced at the completion of each pier. And we began to lay stones atop them.

'Those with a talent for diving would go into the water to help build the piers. Others would move the stones on the beach. The strong would help pile the stones on top of another. The skilled would polish and pave the surfaces of the stones. Some caught even more fish than before on the bridge to keep the rest

of us fed. Others would cook those fish. We assigned different tasks to those with the right talents and pressed forward. Each and every day was more fulfilling than the last.'

The motorrad paused there. The amazed rider ran her hands over the paving stones, tapped on the railings, and looked down at the piers.

The motorrad asked if he should read more, or stop because the mystery had been solved.

The rider wanted more of the story. What had happened to the country? And where had its people gone? Had they returned to their motherland?

The motorrad continued.

'It was much later, when the children born at the start of our labors were beginning to join us in the construction efforts, that we came to a horrifying realization. We did not have enough materials to complete the bridge. We quickly understood why. We had used those materials to repair our homes and ramparts. Everyone was ashamed. Seized by the fear that we would never be able to complete the bridge.

'There was only one solution. We began to dismantle houses to use the stones for their rightful purpose. Efficiency fell because processing the used stones took more time. Those left without homes had to move in with other families. But no sacrifice was too great for our task.

'When we had no more houses left to dismantle, we turned to the walls. We cut into them with frugal caution. It was not a terrible concern, because we had no enemies to invade in the first place. But the country began to turn into a desert. We took down the walls and used the stones from them to build new homes on the bridge. We continued construction from our new homes on the sea.

'Eventually, our country had no more buildings or walls left standing. It was once again a barren desert. But we continued undaunted. Slowly but surely we made progress, constantly haunted by the fear of running out of materials.

'One day, we finally caught sight of something on the horizon. The desert on the other side of the sea. Words cannot express the sheer elation we felt at the

momentous occasion.

'We used up the rest of our materials to complete the final pier. We were all convinced of our success. There would be just enough stones to complete the project. We dismantled our houses one by one. We slept under the stars. Some became ill from exposure, but that was a small price to pay.

'By the time we were completely out of stones, we knew exactly in what ways the bridge was complete and incomplete.

'The bridge was finished. Except for one part. The very center, where the final house had stood. We realized when we went to pick up the last of the stones that this final area was a rugged and sunken pit. It was a foolish oversight.

'The pit was much too long and wide to serve its function as part of a bridge. We needed to acquire more stone to fill it in. But there was none to be found in the desert. And none we could shave away from other sections of the bridge.

'We experimented with multiple techniques. We tried to create bricks, but the sand would not solidify. We tried filling the pit with sand and dousing it with water. People sank when they tried to cross. We even considered going to another land to get more stone. But it was impossible.

'For some time, we idly chastised ourselves for our foolishness. There should have been more than enough stone to spare at first. But we had wasted it all on our houses and walls. It was all our own fault. We stared in despair at the pit that left the bridge incomplete.

'It was just one pit. Only one hole that needed filling. Then the bridge would be finished. We needed something that could take the place of stone—hard and sturdy enough to bear weight. We thought and agonized for some time before finally arriving at a magnificent solution. It was so simple; how had we not noticed? The materials had been on hand all this time.

'We first picked out the women and elders, who were weak and could not contribute to the efforts. We stripped away their flesh and found ourselves with a large quantity of hard, white bones. The final ingredient. We laid them carefully in the pit to leave no gaps.

'Slowly, we filled the pit. After the women and elders were the children.

Children's bones were too small and brittle, but their flesh was perfect for fishing.

'Finally, we settled on an order and killed the men, one after another. Men had strong, sturdy bones. We made rapid progress and celebrated each time the pit grew smaller. We set the arms and legs and ribs together, and filled the gaps with finely crushed skulls. Work progressed smoothly.'

'Finally, the pit was filled. I am the last one remaining, but that is of no concern. I can finish the work myself. I simply need to insert one spine in the gap and polish its surface to match the rest of the bridge. Yes. The bridge has been completed. I leave this tale here. In other words—'

How did the sentence end, asked the rider. The motorrad replied that that was the end of the sentence.

He explained that the final man's whereabouts were unknown, but there was a clue.

When the rider asked what the clue was, the motorrad told the rider to look down. Just ahead, the paving stones looked slightly different. The rider squatted and examined the surface carefully, before exclaiming out loud.

A human spine was carefully laid there. It was carved into a pattern, the gaps filled in with thinner pieces of bone and finished with a smooth polish.

The rider looked up. The spine continued for a short distance before giving way to stone.

The rider stood on the white line on the ocean and fell into thought. Her gaze was on the distance.

Eventually, she declared to the motorrad that they would camp there for the night.

The motorrad was shocked. He asked her why. The rider replied that she wanted to follow her usual rule.

As the motorrad wondered what she meant, the rider propped him up on his center stand and unloaded her gear from the luggage rack.

I'm in the mood for fish today, the rider said, rummaging through one of the

compartments hanging beside the motorrad's rear wheel for a fishing line and a hook.

The motorrad pointed out that she did not have a fishing rod.

The rider opened up her bag. Near the mouth was a dismantled rifle-type persuader. She pulled out the parts, put them together, and secured them with the pin. Then she tied the fishing line at the end of the barrel and added a sinker, hook, and bell to the other end of the line.

The motorrad noted that her master would be sad to see her persuader used this way.

The rider cut up some of her portable rations into small pieces, put a piece onto the hook, and cast the line into the water. She sat on the railing. The rider took off her hat and lazily looked up at the blue sky. Slowly, she stretched.

Can you really land something with that, asked the motorrad.

I don't know, the rider replied.

A long white line cut across the blue sea.

It was a great, majestic bridge. On the bridge stood a motorrad. Next to the motorrad, a person fishing with a rifle.

On that stretch of the bridge, the paving stones were slightly different from the rest. They were of a slightly different hue, drawing massive letters in the bridge when seen from overhead.

It was the end of the sentence on the railing.

'we have done it.'





Chapter 11: "The Tower Country" -Free Lance-

Once upon a time, there was a traveler named Kino. Kino was young by human standards, but she was unbeatable with the persuader.

Kino's partner was a motorrad named Hermes. Kino had changed his rear seat into a luggage rack for her travel bags. They were visiting all sorts of different countries together.

One day, Kino and Hermes spotted a very, very tall tower in the distance, beyond the woods. The tower was so tall that it looked like a line coming down from the clouds.

Kino and Hermes went towards the tower and found a country surrounded by walls, and the base of the brick tower.

When they went inside the country, they found the people still hard at work.

"Welcome, Traveler. Feel free to look around," said a villager. Kino greeted him and said, "This is a magnificent tower you're building. Could I ask how long it took you to get it this far, and why you're working on it?"

"It's been 230 years since we started on this tower. But not even we know why we're building it," the villager said. Then he added, "That's because we've been building towers since before we had a writing system. But it doesn't really matter, does it? We are happy to be able to work on this tower. That's more than enough."

The next day, Kino woke up at sunrise.

Hermes was a sleepyhead, so Kino had to smack him awake when the sun was high up in the sky. They went to see the tower together. The weather was clear that day, so they could just make out the top of the tower.

Nearby, people were drying clay from a river to make into bricks. They took the bricks up the stairs in the tower and kept building up and up and up. Sometimes, parts of the tower weren't made correctly and ended up falling without warning. The falling bricks were very, very dangerous.

Kino looked very carefully at the tower, at every nook and cranny.

Hermes knew more about buildings than most people. He said to Kino, "Kino, this tower is going to fall. The bricks in the foundation are cracked. One strong breeze, and the whole building will come crashing down."

"Hm."

Kino nodded quietly. And she didn't tell the villagers anything.

That night, there was a terrible storm.

The next day. It was the third day of Kino and Hermes' stay in the country.

Kino was having a buffet breakfast in the village when she heard a commotion.

Someone cried, "The tower is falling! It's going westward! Get out of there!"

Kino and Hermes and everyone at the inn rushed outside. The tower was slowly falling.

When the cracked foundation crumbled, and the tower could not stand. Most of the bricks fell to the west as it slowly, very slowly collapsed completely.

There was a loud noise. The dust cleared. Where the tower had been before was now a mountain of bricks.

Kino and Hermes went to the tower.

Many people were there, cheering and dancing on the bricks.

"It's down! It's down!"

"Finally, after 230 years!"

"I can't believe it fell in our lifetime! I can't believe I got to see it with my own eyes!"

"Hooray!"

One person said to Kino, "Traveler! The tower's finally fallen. It's such an honor to have seen it collapse in person."

"What will you do now?" asked Hermes.

The villager replied, "Build another one, of course! This time, we'll make one that lasts 300 years."

"I see," said Kino.

Soon, the people got together and started discussing their plans.

"I knew it. We need bigger bricks for the foundation. This time, we'll make the base larger and have the tower taper off as it goes further up."

"We have to take the wind into account too. How about we polish the outer bricks to a shine? It might reduce wind resistance."

"What about the planning stage, then? We'll spend the next ten years clearing out the bricks and making blueprints. Then we'll dedicate twenty years to baking bricks for the foundation, and build the foundation in less than thirty. Then we'll just have to keep going up and up and up."

Kino waved to the people as they planned for their exciting new project.

"We'll be leaving now. Good luck, everyone."

Everyone waved back, smiling. Kino and Hermes turned to go back to the inn.

That was when one man spoke to Kino, anxious. He said that he had a favor to ask. Kino asked him what he wanted.

"You have to get me out of here!" he said.

When Kino asked him why, the man replied,

"I don't want to live in this country anymore. It's foolish, spending your life building a tower that's going to fall. I'm sick of it."

Kino didn't say anything.

"Don't you think this is a strange country too, Traveler? You think they're all crazy, right? You can be honest with me!"

Kino replied honestly, "I'm not sure. Are they the crazy ones, or are you?"

The man asked, almost in tears, "I'm begging you. Take me with you, please. I can't spend the rest of my life in a place like this. You have to help me."

Kino replied that she could not. The man said that he would make her take him away, even if he had to use force. "You'll do what I say if you know what's good for—" was as far as he got before Kino flashed him her persuader, saying that she didn't want to make trouble for either of them. The man stopped.

He fell to his knees and began to sob.

"I can't go on like this... There's no freedom in this country. Anyone who opposes building the tower loses his citizenship and becomes a living pillar. What am I supposed to do?"

Kino asked Hermes what a living pillar was. Hermes explained that it was a person buried alive in the foundation. Kino nodded.

The man was still crying. "I don't want to spend my life building a tower. I want to do something else, but I don't have the freedom. There's no such thing in this country. I want to be free."

Kino looked at Hermes, then whispered to the man, "If you don't want to build a tower, then how about you become a carver and carve beautiful patterns into bricks?"

The man turned. His teary eyes turned to dinner plates.

"Yes! That sounds perfect! From now on, I'll be a carver. I'll be a free man, carving patterns into bricks to my heart's content!"

The man got up and ran to the other people. "Listen, everyone! From now on, I'm going to be a carver. I'm going to make beautiful patterns in each and every brick you bake!"

Everyone approved.

"That's a great idea!"

"Yes! We can use your bricks for the stairs! It's going to be lovely!"

"Wonderful idea! We'll leave the carving work to you!"

The man smiled, embarrassed.

Kino and Hermes left. They went back to the inn, packed up, and left the country.

Kino's journey continues, but this is the end of this story.



Epilogue: Amidst a Sea of Red -A -Blooming Prairie-

A-

The country was in ruins.

Instead of protecting the city, the stone walls were scattered everywhere. Instead of being closed, the gates lay fallen on the ground.

Not a single building had been spared. The windows were shattered, the ceilings sunken, and the walls had collapsed. Some houses had been burned to the ground. A tower had collapsed on top of several buildings. Ruined buildings left mountains of bricks that blocked off roads.

The sky was a clear blue. The desolate streets were silent.

Hermes stood propped up on his center stand in a patch of earth near the western gates.

There was no one around him.

"I'm bored," he finally mumbled.

Someone's footsteps began to sound from the distance. Soon, Kino returned.

Kino was wearing her brown coat. Her hat, shoulders, and shoes were covered in dirt. She holstered Cannon.

"Well, Kino?" asked Hermes.

"Not a soul. I saw some bones here and there, but I think most of them must be under the rubble," she replied indifferently, dusting herself off.

"I wonder what it was. An earthquake? A tornado? Any ideas?"

"None," Kino said tersely, and put on her coat before climbing on. "There's nothing more to do here. No need to ever come back."

"Yeah."

Kino started Hermes. The roar of the engine filled the deserted streets.

Putting on her hat and goggles, Kino took one more look at the ruins.

Then she took off.

Kino and Hermes traveled down the deserted road and emerged out the gates.

They followed the road into gentle, rolling slopes that seemed to go on forever.

"Kino," said Hermes.

"Hm?"

"What're you going to do now?"

"I don't know," Kino replied, falling into thought.

They climbed up a high hill and reached the top.

"Maybe I'll sing," she concluded.

Before them was a world of red. The land was covered in red flowers in full bloom, from the top of the hill to the very edge of the horizon.

Kino took Hermes into the sea of red, through the flowers. Eventually, she stopped and shut off the engine.

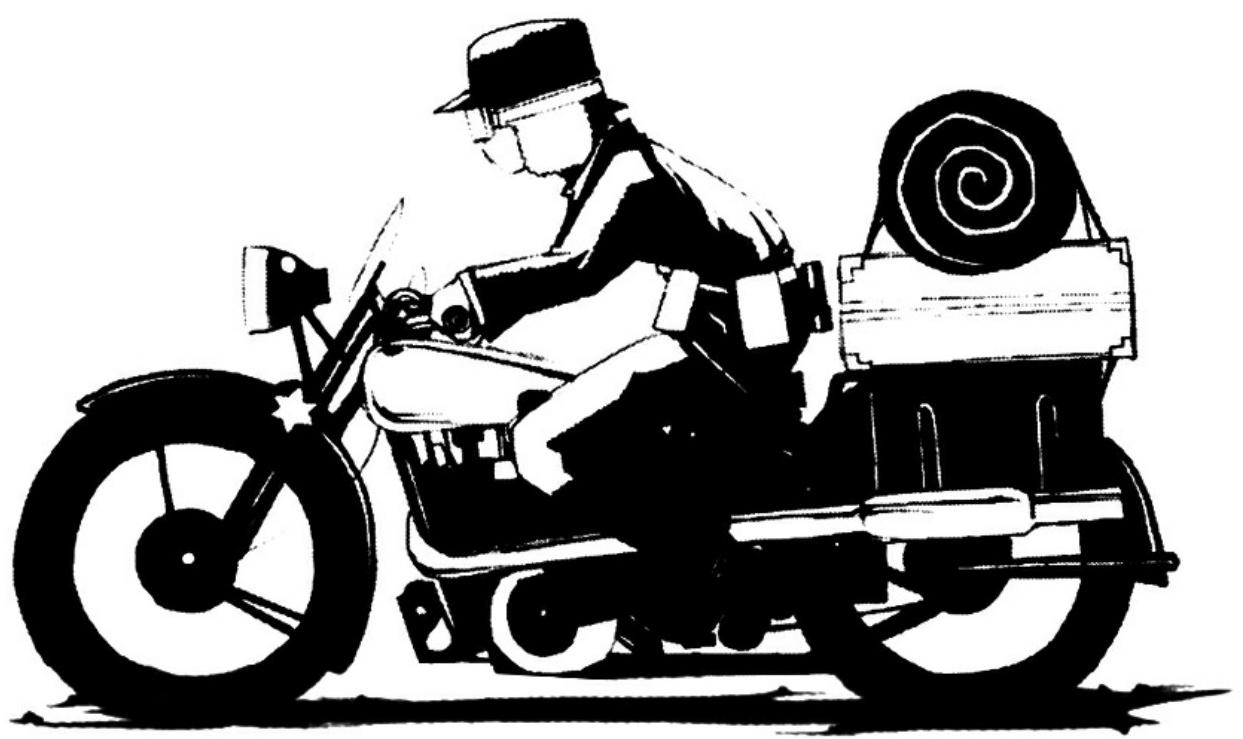
"Whoa!" Hermes cried. Kino tipped him over on his side. And she followed him down.

Red petals flew into the air.

"That wasn't very nice," Hermes lectured jokingly. "Who could have tipped me over, I wonder?"

"Aha ha ha!" Kino laughed, looking up at the sky. She took a deep breath.

And she began to sing.



Afterward —Preface— [1]

Hello everyone. Thank you for reading this far. As always, this is the author, Keiichi Sigsawa.

‘Kino no Tabi’ has finally reached its fourth volume. This is all thanks to the readers.

Why, thank you very much for your support! [2]

Because of a sudden turn of events, even this author doesn’t know what will happen next (laughs).

This time, I was considering an idea of making Kino’s last journey to be that into space. At the onset, it will be revealed that the real enemies are the ‘*Four Great Demons of the Universe*’. In the final battle, a can opener will accomplish an important role, and the hot bath in the third chapter will serve as foreshadowing. I was quite satisfied when I wrote it down.

Even though I really planned this out since the third volume, making Kino’s character more solid seemed a good idea, and it turned out that the first appearance would be here!

I wanted to make Hermes transform into a green spaceship by the end of volume two, but I changed my mind. The plan is crazy in some places so I will just develop what will happen next based on my gut feel (laughs).

I think it would be surprising if I reveal that Riku is actually a spy of the enemy and have Shizu kidnapped using chloroform. Shizu’s sword will break into five pieces, and as to what Shizu would do then... Even the author doesn’t know the answer to that (laughs). But I haven’t decided yet (laughs again).

But there’s one thing for sure. The real fight has just begun to determine Kino and Shizu’s future. There’s more to come.

To defeat one of the ‘*Four Great Demons of the Universe*’, Kino and company will have to obtain the legendary persuader, ‘*Big Cannon Shining Iron Demon Destroyer*’^[3], which even Master cannot get her hands on. Then they will be heading towards the outskirts of the universe.

From here on, the main plot will deal with the mystery to surpass the demon’s territory ‘*Void*’, a ‘human story’ in a planet they will pass by, and a series of thrilling battles with the enemy’s special forces, ‘*The Forty-Five Color Dark Army*’.

Oh, right. In the final chapter, when they come out twice the astronautical speed, Kino will say, ‘But eye drops are bitter.’ This will be a big, big hint on what will happen next. Ah, I’ve written it down (laughs).

In a side story, Master will reappear in a dining room scene, where she would be having a fierce argument with Shizu. I loved this stylish dialogue to such an extent that I wrote a whole chapter without a single narrative.

But the editor said, “It’s too long,” and I reluctantly cut out some of the dialogue (cries...). Someday, if I get the chance, I would like to explain in detail why Shizu was fixated on grilling using charcoal fire.

Well from here on, the next three volumes or so of ‘Kino no Tabi’ will be focusing on the main battle, though the development will be fairly hard. The second part will be tasteful; with Kino becoming involved in malicious stock trading after arriving at a certain planet. How will Kino be able to recover after she loses all of her money as well as Hermes? I believe this will be Dengeki Bunko’s first stock trading drama. Twenty volumes are slated for the second part.

And with a sudden turn of events, in the third part, Kino will end up as a student in a certain planet, and will get involved with troublesome situations^[4]. The enemy here will be... *drumming noise*... one of her classmates. The one who would play a particularly important role is the mysterious student council president who would take over the school. And then, there will be the reappearance of... oops, I’m not going to tell (laughs). Perhaps, everyone’s booing me right now (grins).

There’s still more in store for ‘Kino no Tabi’. The current plot will end in 34

issues, but there are plans to extend it up to volume 454. I think we will have quite a long partnership, so from here on, I'll work even harder in writing. Please continue your support!

Summer, 2001

Keiichi Sigsawa

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Normally, the title should be *atogaki*, which means ‘afterword’. However this one is entitled *atogasa*, which sounds to me like ‘What happened after is...’, hence this title. As a side note, *atogaki* and *atogasa* are identical except for their last characters, and moreover, the hiragana characters for ‘ki’ and ‘sa’ are very similar.
2. ↑ Specifically, the author said “*kansha kangeki amearare*”, which means something like, ‘gratitude and appreciation raining like hail’. After digging for a bit, I read somewhere that this was a pun on a phrase used in times of war, “*ransha rangeki amearare*”, literally, ‘bullets being fired blindly like rain and hail’.
3. ↑ Translation borrowed straight from Untuned-Strings' Gakuen Kino translation.
4. ↑ So this is the joke that gave birth to the spin-off series, Gakuen Kino...

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